



ONLY SCRAPING THE SURFACE:
Martin MacLeod pictured with one of the company's seaweed cutting machines

Extolling the virtues of seaweed

Extolling the virtues of seaweed

BRIAN WILSON profile



BRIAN WILSON talks to Martin MacLeod, one of the founders of the Hebridean Seaweed Company, who believes seaweed has a big future in the food industry...

We are looking for more people to profile. If there is someone in your area you think should be interviewed, please contact Lynne on 01471 820400 or e-mail lynne@whfp.co.uk

THERE ARE FEW industries of which it can truly be said that the Western Isles represent a natural global centre. Harris Tweed by legal definition; perhaps renewable energy if we can ever get our act together. And seaweed.

It is here in abundance and nowhere on the face of the earth produces stuff of higher quality. The absence of pollution, explains Martin MacLeod, makes Hebridean seaweed the purest in the business, with extraction rates of the properties that make seaweed such useful stuff consistently higher than elsewhere. "We have Grade A water — the best in Britain if not in Europe."

Martin has been working with seaweed for the past 16 years and is taking it into uses and markets never previously envisaged. He and his business partner, Malcolm Macrae, founded Hebridean Seaweed, based at Arnish, five years ago when the industry had ceased to exist. They now have more than 40 cutters hard at work, from the Butt of Lewis down to Grimsay in Uist.

But if progress has been impressive, it is future potential that makes seaweed exciting. Seaweed's hour may have come. This week, I met Martin on his way home from France where he was visiting a company which receives wet seaweed from Lewis, frozen for purposes of transportation. At Lannion in Brittany, they extract antioxidants from the weed for use in food and cosmetic products.

Hebridean Seaweed, as primary producers, are partners in an EU programme which also involves Reading University and consumer companies in Spain, Italy and Ireland. The aim is to maximise the healthy extraction and application of the antioxidants. Since, in the wrong quantities, these can be deadly rather than beneficial, the process has to be heavily researched. Reading University, says Martin, is the "leading stomach health centre in Europe"; hence its involvement.

Seaweed in bulk is a high-volume, low-value product. But that equation is reversed when it comes to antioxidants which are used in tiny quantities and sell at £3,000 a kilo and upwards. It would make a lot more sense to do the same thing in Lewis, where the extraction rate would be even higher. "The sooner you get it from the water, the better,"

says Martin. So that is the next part of the Arnish plan.

THE HISTORY OF the seaweed industry in the Hebrides goes back for a few hundred years and never brought much joy to anyone other than the landlords who made vast fortunes from the back-breaking toil of their tenantry.

In its more modern form, the industry dates back to the early post-war years when Alginate Industries Limited opened four drying plants in the islands to feed their mainland factories at Barcaldine and Girvan. One of these plants was at Keose in Lewis.

Then, in the early 1980s, something rather odd happened. Alginate Industries wanted to sell to a Californian company, Kelco. The British competition authorities saw no problem but their French counterparts did. It became a condition of the sale that Kelco should dispose of the Keose unit. Initially, it was taken over by a local co-op with six members.

This maintained employment for a few years before ownership changed a couple of times, ending up in the hands of a local businessman, John Alex Mackenzie who formed Tavay Organic Products. Throughout this period, the constant factor was Dixie MacLean from Leurbost who managed the Keose operation and held the whole show together. Enter, in the summer of 1994, Martin MacLeod.

A native of Leurbost and a graduate of the local secondary school, Martin — or "Midge" as he has been more widely known since diminutive primary days — went off to Lews Castle College to do a course in electrical engineering. He dropped out after a couple of years and took a summer job at Keose. Four years later, he was still there when Dixie had to retire suddenly for health reasons. Martin took over the managerial role.

The equipment, he says, was basic and coal-fired while the process had not moved on. AIL at Girvan were still the main customers for Tavay and the end-product was animal feed. Things went on like this for a few years before the machinery, almost literally, ground to a halt and the Keose factory closed in 2003. But Martin had seen enough to persuade him that there was a lot more to seaweed than met the eye.

This belief was encouraged by a Russian

scientist who was working with the Calanais health products company at Breascleite and "who thought seaweed was the answer to all the world's problems". Malcolm Macrae, a marine biologist with a Masters degree in chemistry, was also employed at Breascleite and told Martin about this interest. Malcolm is another Leurbost man and the two were Winter League partners at Stornoway Golf Club "so we first discussed it over a pint".

Nothing ever came of the Calanais interest but the two men started to put together plans for a new business. Its basis was support from Tavay's former customers. Armed with guarantees of 1,000 tonnes of sales a year, they won backing from the bank and Highlands and Islands Enterprise for a new factory at Arnish and production there began in 2005. The basic business is still producing powdered seaweed for use in animal feed and horticultural products, but it is the new dimensions which make Hebridean Seaweed such an interesting enterprise.

Martin explains: "When we started, we were very fortunate. We were the only people of any size doing seaweed anywhere in Britain. Customers were phoning me up asking if we could supply them. We are now doing 5,000 tonnes a year, which is about four times what the old factory was producing. Very importantly, we also hold the certification that allows us to produce human food products."

"THIS IS THE BIG emerging market for seaweed," says Martin.

"Historically, the markets have been animal feed, horticulture and alginates. But there is now a great push going on to find substitutes for salt in foodstuffs and that is where seaweed comes in. Salt replacement is a huge issue for food ingredient companies and supermarkets."

Essentially, seaweed can perform many of the useful functions associated with salt but without contributing to high blood pressure and strokes. Salt is 40 per cent sodium and seaweed three per cent. Martin quotes the example of bread which sneaks a lot of salt into us. Hebridean Seaweed is involved in a project with Sheffield Hallam University and a local bakery, Artisan Breads, to replace salt with seaweed. Blind tastings suggest that consumers actually prefer the seaweed version.

Ready meals sold by supermarkets represent "heart attacks in a plastic tub", says Martin. Within the next few years, EU regulations will force reductions in the salt content. "The universities tell us that it is like an arms race to find ways of replacing salt, in order to meet Government guidelines. All the big food companies are desperate to be seen to do something, and seaweed is one of their strongest possibilities."

The EU is throwing money at a whole range of studies which Hebridean Seaweed are involved in. Martin has found that they are well ahead of rivals in other countries because of a well-established UK culture of academic co-operation with universities in order to address health issues.

They are also getting into consumer products through a joint venture with a company called Seagreens which is a well-established producer of healthy foods. A couple of months ago, they launched a product called The Mineral Salt which is 50 per cent Cornish sea salt and 50 per cent Hebridean Seaweed. "The sales of that are brilliant," says Martin. "It's available through more than 200 outlets and we are trying to get it into some prominent catering establishments."

I'm talking to Martin in Glasgow's Blythswood Square Hotel and that is another reminder of Hebridean seaweed's versatility. The fabulous spa in the hotel uses products specially made from seaweed and Martin is now thinking of creating a retail range. The possibilities of what to do with seaweed are, it seems, endless and the surface has only been scraped. For (another) example, the EU is funding research into seaweed as an alternative fuel.

Martin points out that the Chinese and Japanese have known all this for centuries. "Ten per cent of their foodstuffs are one kind of seaweed or another. They treat it as a vegetable. They don't think of it as useless slimy stuff, as most people do here."

So have the Western Isles been overlooking a valuable natural resource for all these years? Martin says: "The worst thing for these islands was that the industry was under the control of Alginate Industries' iron fist. It was about producing seaweed for Alginate Industries and that was it. Now we have the chance to catch up."