

Eco clothing

breeds a greater worth – all the while creating a sustainable way of life for small farmers and safeguarding age-old craftsmanship and traditions. They have combined textures and weaves to produce the country's first collection of organic tweed, including tailored sports coats and ladies' jackets, as well as organic scarves, rugs and throws.

Isle of Mull Weavers was founded in 1987 by Bob Ryan, a lifetime weaver, and his wife Cathy. Bob formed a partnership with Aeneas, who had switched his farm to native Hebridean breeds from the commercial Blackface and decreased the number from 600 to 200 sheep.

'Hebrideans are a better breed for the land, which has flourished, and we get a better income from the wool,' says Aeneas Mackey. Eight years ago the farm converted to organic.

Unique in terms of their shades – from steel-grey to jet black – Ardalanish's 200 Hebridean sheep produce 200 kilograms of wool. The remaining 2.5 tonnes of wool comes from around the country, from such esoteric-sounding breeds as the Castlemilk Moorit, Manx Loughtan and

from the Shetland Organic Producers Organisation, which includes 30 farmers rearing native Shetland hill sheep. Almost two-thirds of the wool is organic, but, as Aeneas says, 'Smaller farmers can't afford the £500 for certification.'

'When we started weaving Hebridean wool, I was inundated with requests from breeders who didn't know what to do with their wool.'

Aeneas estimates that there are between 5,000 and 6,000 Hebridean sheep in the UK. 'On the whole of the Isle of Mull there are perhaps 20,000 sheep. If all of these were native Hebridean breeds, our entire weaving operation could be run just from farmers on Mull.'

Weaving is a hands-on process using what Aeneas describes as 'a dependable but ancient mechanical 1930s loom'. The products are unique, as the colours of the yarn vary from sheep to sheep. The undyed brown and black fleece of the Ardalanish Hebridean sheep is mixed with the natural whites and fawns of Shetland wool from Shetland Organic growers.

'It's been difficult to make the whole process organic,' says Aeneas. 'Aside from the wool, there is organic scouring, organic spinning and

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The Mull initiative gives wool from rarer breeds a greater worth, creating a way of life for small farmers

organic finishing, which has been the most difficult. Soil Association standards for organic wool won't allow non-biodegradable detergents to be used, or those with high aquatic toxicity, and there is no bleaching. They also put limits on the use of heavy metals so environmentally friendly alternatives to chrome dyes are needed.'

Isle of Mull Weavers have had to rope in other smaller organisations, also certified organic, to perform parts of the manufacturing process. But the next stage is to develop their own scouring and spinning facilities. This is a local cottage industry, but one that started from the bottom up and which has had clear benefits to the community. While not mass-market, their products find a natural home in high-quality tailoring outfits such as Savile Row and beyond. **E**

The womenswear collection as well as a range of scarves, shawls, wraps & throws are available by mail order. Prices range from £25 for a wool scarf to £795 for a hand made designer coat. To buy: www.ardalanishfarm.co.uk

Below: Hebridean sheep grazing on Ardalanish Bay

