

FRIENDS OF THE SCOTSMAN /

Don't grouse about sporting moors – they are important for conservation

Globally, heather moorland of the sort maintained for grouse shooting is among the rarest habitat types with the highest conservation designation. However, many moors were not designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest in spite of being grouse moors, but because they were grouse moors. They are current and future wildlife refuges illustrated by the fact that critically endangered waders still thrive on them.

Well-conducted management for grouse shooting can be a force for good. Its demise would pose significant challenges for landscape, biodiversity and local rural economies. We recognise, however, there is room for improvement. For example, grouse moors might play a greater role in protecting and enhancing peat storage, for carbon capture and for water storage, although wetter ground may have consequences for agriculture and nature, so balances may be required.

The correct balance in managing moorland requires new processes and reassessing long-held beliefs. Some traditional features of grouse moor management are being challenged, which is understandable. Private investors and policy makers need evidence and research to guide new development. Grouse moors should be part of a suite of land uses, alongside forestry, farming and renewables, in a sustainable future for our uplands. Alternative

Bruce Russell outlines the benefits of managing and maintaining grouse shooting uplands for the rural economy and diverse animal habitats

land uses should be assessed to determine public benefits and trade-offs in terms of negative impacts. We all want a productive landscape, rich in game and wildlife.

Moorland is one of our most distinctive landscapes with Britain and Ireland called “the world’s greatest moorland countries”. Moors support rare flora and fauna and deliver other public goods and services, drinking water, carbon storage and recreation. They may feel wild, but they aren’t ‘wilderness’, having had millennia of human influence. Deforestation by burning took place from 9000 years ago; man has played a crucial role in creating and maintaining this ‘cultural landscape’.

Our managed moors are a range of semi-natural priority habitats, heaths and blanket bogs. Heather, heaths and berries characterise the dwarf-shrub upland heathlands, contributing a blaze of purple late-summer colour. Blanket bogs have abundant sphagnum mosses and sedges and cotton grass.

Moorland habitats represent around half of Scotland, with upland heath covering approximately

778,000 ha, its extent, composition and quality influenced by climate, drainage, pollution, grazing, burning, forestry and increased recreational activity. Between 1990 and 2007 there was little change in area but it was noted that ‘species richness’ was in decline.

Scottish moorland supports various land uses – farming, forestry, renewables, sporting and recreation. It delivers ecosystem services as well as being iconic landscape of high aesthetic value, and consequently is often associated with national parks and nature reserves.

Forestry, supported by government subsidy, increased from the 1940s to late 1980s in the uplands, resulting in significant loss of moorland and mountain habitat. Recently, onshore wind farms have impacted on landscape and biodiversity with an estimated 30 per cent of installed wind farms on core moorland, mountain and heath.

Around 55 per cent of agriculture in Scotland is dedicated to upland sheep and cattle, bringing socio-economic benefits and maintaining habitat. However, upland sheep numbers

have reduced significantly in places and deer populations have held steady for 20 years, a combination of harsh winters, culling and major reduction programmes. Overgrazing, however, still reduces heather cover and damages bog vegetation by trampling.

In 2009, there were just over 300 Scottish grouse moors covering more than 1 million hectares. Heather burning and sheep grazing are used to produce a pattern of older, denser and taller heather habitats mixed

with younger, shorter and more nutritious vegetation, both utilised by red grouse. Management protects heather habitat and associated public goods and services, but in certain circumstances has been shown to contribute to changes in the nature of some moors.

The principal motivation for managing a moor is to produce a surplus of grouse for driven shooting, as opposed to walked up shooting. The income that can be generated from let driven days is markedly

higher. The greater the return, then the greater the financial investment in management.

Predator and disease control and habitat management to encourage grouse productivity bring many collateral benefits, such as the conservation of increasingly rare species, and securing the conservation status of birds of prey. The key to safeguarding the future of sporting moorland is that it is managed ‘sustainably’ – management to meet a full range of demands without the

ecosystem becoming depleted or damaged. There is evidence that the trade-offs necessary for best practice grouse moor management still leave Scotland’s moorland with a net gain and, consequently, driven grouse moors have an important role to play in the future of our uplands.

Sustaining Scotland’s Moorland, which provides a summary of the latest GWCT research, is available at www.gwct.org.uk/sustain *Bruce Russell, director Scotland, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust.*

↑ **Grouse moors, like Horseupcleugh in Berwickshire, cover more than a million hectares of Scotland**



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We can do
something
about global
warming and
extinction –
but we need
to act now

Paul Walton welcomes the
lead shown by Scotland in
tackling twin threats

The opening decades of the 21st century have brought political and social upheavals which affect everyone and show no signs of abating. Our impact on the environment has become a ubiquitous reality. Nature everywhere, even in the deepest oceans, is subject to pressures from unsustainable human behaviours and over-consumption. The twin global crises of climate change and ecological damage have become manifest during our lifetimes, and the future of all life will depend on our next steps.

There is irony in this predicament. Our actions have put us on course for these entwined environmental crises at planetary scale. Yet, just as we set that course, our understanding of our place in nature has matured. We

now have collective insight that all life on Earth is related, both in terms of shared origins, and of intricate ecological interdependencies. With this knowledge, framing humanity as just one integral and inter-reliant part of nature is no longer just an opinion – it is a fact.

Can we act in time to reflect this understanding? Can we secure a habitable future for coming generations of both people and the non-human living world? Perhaps the most hopeful message in these febrile times is that, when we gather our best skill and knowledge, when we collaborate to analyse our present and look to the future, the answers emerge.

We can do what is required, but only if – and of all ‘big ifs’, this is the biggest

– we enact transformative change, and do so urgently.

Calling for change without defining what change means is a strategy that the environmental movement is beginning to outgrow. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established by the UN in 1988 to assess and synthesise the evidence for climate change and its causes. The panel’s reports, impacting as they do on the almost incalculable financial weight and influence of the fossil fuel industry, have been controversial and challenging. Political responses have been faltering.

Yet, despite these vagaries, the IPCC has focused minds and efforts as never before, giving those who seek positive change a global reference, and policy makers meaning-

ful targets. Young people are right to insist that we are not moving fast enough. Too many pivotal players still shirk their responsibilities. But there is a faint yet distinct scent on the warming wind that humanity might be beginning to move in a better direction – towards transformative change in relation to atmospheric carbon. It is no small matter that Scotland – through the work of the Stop Climate Chaos Scotland coalition, of which RSPB Scotland is a part, and the far-sightedness of our parliamentarians – is in a real sense taking a lead.

The Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) was also established under the UN, in 2012. Formed in response to humanity’s failure to halt or even slow down

the loss of biodiversity globally, its role is to inform and underpin the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Like the IPCC, the deliberations of IPBES have had tumultuous moments and there will be more to come.

These are not simple challenges. However, with this year’s publication of the first IPBES Global Assessment, we now have our most accurate and authoritative calculation of where humanity stands in relation to nature. It concludes that we can halt and reverse the declines in biodiversity, and we can utilise nature sustainably.

Transformative change is an absolute prerequisite for success, but that change is deliverable within broad current socioeconomic realities if we

enact a step-change in how diligently and intelligently we progress.

This means first accepting, as Scotland’s First Minister has said, that the challenges facing biodiversity are as important as the challenge of climate change. It means addressing both as deeply interconnected problems. The habitats of Scotland – peatlands, uplands, native woodlands – are high value carbon and biodiversity assets of global significance. Transformative change means enacting policies that enhance both.

For example, Scotland’s new forestry planting target of 15,000 hectares each year must deliver both carbon storage and biodiversity. If most planting is the familiar regimented stands dominated by non-native conifers, this target will never deliv-

er for nature. We need the right trees in the right places, designed with nature as much in mind as carbon or profit.

If we invest our ingenuity to integrate policies, devise complementary solutions and tackle these twin global crises simultaneously, Scotland can again innovate and lead the way towards transformative change and a better world.

Paul Walton, head of habitats and species, RSPB Scotland.

