

The Royal Family, land management and COP 26 – from the Cairngorms to Cornwall

Description



An isolated pine, a remnant of the Caledonian Pine Forest, survives above the deer fence and regeneration area at Ballochbuie on the Balmoral Estate. With lower numbers of red deer, the whole of this area would be regenerating as forest.

Today's Herald on Sunday, in conjunction with the independent investigative journalists' platform the Ferret, looks forward to next week's COP 26 climate conference in Glasgow. 26 people were asked to contribute their views on a future vision for Scotland ([see here](#)). This is what I said:

"In the Scottish uplands overgrazing by red deer will be controlled so that our forest and mountain habitats regenerate. And, to achieve this, the Royal Family promise to make massive changes in land management at Balmoral and elsewhere."

It is good that the Royal Family are playing a significant role in this conference and have been prominent in recent weeks in raising public awareness about it and the critical issues that all nations face in meeting the challenges of both climate change and biodiversity loss. As the owners of large tracts of land in the UK the Royal Family is in a special position. The management of their land should meet the highest standards, not only in the delivery of local benefit but also as an example to others, both in the UK and further afield. And this includes change in land use practice to meet tomorrow's needs. This post takes a closer look at what further action we might expect from the Royal Family.

The Royal Family and the Cairngorms

In the uplands the focus of Royal Family interest is their Balmoral estate and nearby Deeside land in the Cairngorms National Park. Prime objectives of this royal land use are forestry, deer stalking and grouse shooting. Traditional management practices are followed, in common with most other privately owned estates in the Scottish Highlands. But there is now substantial public and political pressure for fundamental change in these practices in line with modern requirements for climate change mitigation and biodiversity recovery. This pressure is likely to lead to a re-appraisal of forestry priorities, with a re-direction of planting away from the hills, with their peaty soils, to more lowland areas where soil cultivation does not disturb organic content. In the hills the natural regeneration of native woodland remnants through better control of grazing will become more prominent.



The impact of muirburn, left, and heather cutting, right on Prince Charles's estate of Delnadamph. Nature reduced to a garden lawn.

Heather burning of moorlands is likely to be regulated much more closely so that the prime objective is wildfire control rather than the maximisation of grouse and other game bird populations. Overgrazing by deer is a serious problem in many parts of Scotland, preventing the natural regeneration of woodland and montane habitats as well as the erosion of soil and vegetation on steep slopes. The risk of winter starvation of deer exposed to severe weather in areas of limited food and shelter is a further concern. New legislation in Scotland is expected to deal with these various problems associated with deer and grouse management.

For the Royal Family there are particular challenges on Balmoral estate in respect of deer management. These have been documented in previous parkswatch posts ([Balmoral And The Recommendations Of The Deer Working Group](#); [Three New Year Resolutions For Prince Charles In The Cairngorms](#); [Deer And The Cairngorms National Park](#); [Dr Adam Watson, The Royal Family And The Balavil Road Decision](#); [The Royal Family, Land Mis-Management And The Cairngorms National Park](#)).

managed on Balmoral and its neighbouring estates has been obvious for many years.

The Royal Family and agricultural land

Former Chief Scientist at the UK Government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Professor Sir Ian Boyd, said in 2020 that up to half of UK farmland will need to come out of intensive production in the near future to create woodland, restore wildlife habitats and replenish the carbon content of our soils ([Convert half of UK farmland to nature, urges top scientist | Farming | The Guardian](#)). Today Ian Boyd is co-chair of the First Minister's Environment Council ([see here](#)). The Council's main purpose is to advise the Scottish Government on international best practice and keep Scotland at the forefront of tackling the climate emergency and ecological decline. It will report to COP 26 in Glasgow next month

Far too much farmland is subject to repeated cultivation and application of artificial fertiliser and pesticides to the growing crops. The massive decline in wildflowers, birdlife, insects, mammals and fungi in our lowland countryside, along with damage to our soils, has to stop. The only way to achieve this at the necessary scale is to replace areas of intensive cultivation with habitats that are rich in wildlife and no longer subject to relentless artificial fertiliser and pesticide application. This principle needs to be applied to every farm and croft so that there is a clear distinction between the land used for the intensive raising of crops and animal produce and the nearby low intensity areas needed for environmental benefit.



Expanded field margins would help people as well as the environment. Trying to reach the standing stones near Milnathort in 2002. Photo Credit Dave Morris.

And the most straightforward way to achieve this is through the expansion of field margins in all fields so that wildflowers, shrubs and trees can flourish, under different management regimes, to provide ecological benefit as well as opportunities for public access and enjoyment. Extensive networks of expanded margins will also allow for the establishment of ecological corridors that facilitate plant and animal dispersal and movement across the landscape.

Such a vision can be delivered very rapidly. Most farmers and crofters depend on public subsidy to support at least part of their operations. These financial incentives are now being completely redesigned as a result of the UK's departure from the European Union and its consequential disengagement from the Common Agricultural Policy. The UK has had schemes to promote environmentally sensitive farming in place since the 1980s but covering only limited areas. Lessons need to be learnt from all these schemes so that each of the four UK nations can put in place regulatory and incentive frameworks which are appropriate for different farming systems so that, wherever land is farmed, large scale habitat recovery is a key part of farming operations, with expanded field margins a central part of that recovery.

The Royal Family, with its large holdings of agricultural land in England, is well placed to demonstrate how these changes in farming practice can be brought about. Expanded field margins can encompass

a very wide range of objectives, from the conservation of arable weeds to meadow species protection, from new hedgerow establishment to expansion of existing hedgerows and areas of shrubs and trees, as well as tree planting for timber purposes. Ecological restoration on a landscape scale should be a prime objective of these royal land holdings, accompanied by thorough environmental and economic analysis so that policy makers can learn what are the best management options for these low intensity areas and what sort of regulations and financial incentives will be needed to deliver the best ecological outcomes across the whole of the UK.

Leading by example

Ecological restoration and nature based solutions will be a key component of the COP 26 negotiations. The Royal Family are in a unique position, able to provide leadership, experience and inspiration to governments from across the world while also, as major landowners in the UK, demonstrating what is actually needed in our uplands and lowlands. Overgrazing, deforestation and excessive burning is found in many mountain and hill areas of the world while intensive farming systems have destroyed huge areas of natural habitat and damaged so many river systems. Correcting these problems is an essential part of international efforts to combat the dangers of climate change. When giving their advice to world leaders the Royal Family should be able to point to the ways in which they have tackled these problems on their own land. Major changes are needed on that land, without delay. Ian Boyd and his colleagues on Scotland's Environment Council can help the Royal Family in this work both in the UK and many other countries.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. agriculture
2. conservation
3. Deer
4. forestry
5. grouse moors
6. landed estates
7. Scottish Government

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Author

davemorris