

Public subsidy and Scottish land use – a COP 26 legacy?

Description

“We need farmers”. Speaking in Glasgow on 2 Nov, alongside First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and young activists, the former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Christiana Figueres, emphasised the role of farmers in making a “step change in our relationship to the natural world”. Such a step change was “really crucial” over the next few years (at 1.15 hrs in the 43rd TB Macaulay Lecture “Outrage and optimism in the fact of the #Climate Crisis” [see here](#)).

This post considers what lessons can be learnt from Ms Figueres’ contribution to COP 26, alongside other views about land use in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. Our national parks should be at the forefront in applying these lessons.

Ms Figueres called for much better stewardship of land, alongside clean energy and the end of fossil fuels, as the key requirements for resolving the climate crisis. Noting that within the last 100 years humans have destroyed at least half of our land based ecosystems and wiped out 68% of global wildlife populations, she warned of the consequences, including the impact on the critical ecosystems which are essential for protecting us. Ecosystems are becoming less efficient in capturing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere so that, for the first time in history, key areas are losing their function as carbon sinks and becoming carbon emitters.

Nobody at COP 26 has more experience, over the last 20 years, of negotiating climate change issues with scientists, policy makers and politicians than Ms Figueres. She stressed the need for activism: for all citizens to intensify the pressure on politicians; to resist powerful industries who are fighting for their own survival, but living in the past not the future; forcing financial markets to shift their support from brown to green economies and to demand annual accounting so that real, measurable progress is made towards net zero.

In Scotland we need to recognise that habitat loss and degradation is a massive part of our history, from our overgrazed and over burnt uplands to our intensively managed lowlands, with their excessive use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides. Polluted burns and rivers flow through these green and brown deserts, with little space for wildlife. No wonder that the co-chair of the First Minister’s Environment Council ([see here](#)), Professor Sir Ian Boyd, has previously called for half of the UK’s farmland to come out of intensive management so that habitats can be restored, as I highlighted in my last post ([see here](#)). That is a job for farmers to do, as the principle stewards of our land.

But today farmers are being removed from the land as financial predators stalk our hills. This is what I said in a letter published by the Herald newspaper on 25 Oct this year:

“The wrong trees are being planted in the wrong places by the wrong people.”

“Farmers, gamekeepers and stalkers are right to be very worried at the spreading blanket afforestation of our hills and its impact on their livelihoods (“How the rush to plant trees risks uprooting years of toil, Herald, October 19 [see here](#)). This is a modern day version of the Clearances, sadly being led by the Scottish Government. Our current forestry policy, with its

perverse grant system, is not fit for purpose. No wonder financial institutions, pension managers, hedge funds operators and other asset strippers are grabbing as much land as possible in the Scottish uplands to plant trees with these forestry grants.

Of course planting trees is an important part of the battle to solve our climate and biodiversity challenges. But the wrong trees are being planted in the wrong places by the wrong people. All this is because Scottish ministers do not understand the flaws in our decrepit forestry grant system. They need to go to Norway and see how government grant systems can help farmers to plant trees, continue farming and support rural economies. Far better than allowing financial predators to grab our land, pocket the grants and remove people. Scottish ministers need to redirect the public money for planting away from the hills. Instead planting should be focussed on farmland, where a wider variety of trees can be planted, integrated into existing farm activities and capturing far more carbon than on a windswept hillside.

Financial incentives underpin most land use in Scotland. Decisions on what to plant where are made on an annual basis for many crops. This flexibility is of potentially great value in tackling current environmental problems – farmers and foresters will immediately respond to a change in grant regimes. For example, if we paid farmers to expand every field margin in every field, to grow wild flowers, hedgerows or trees, we would create a massive network of green corridors throughout our lowlands within a couple of years. And, with Scottish access rights applying to every field margin, the increased opportunities for public enjoyment and exercise would be immense.

In the uplands we need a different approach, led by the Royal Family. A walk through Glenfeshie estate in the Cairngorms, in the company of the Danish owner, Anders Povlsen and his family, will demonstrate what is needed. Amongst the naturally regenerating ancient pinewoods of Glenfeshie it will be obvious what has gone wrong on Balmoral estate.

The Queen is reported as being “irritated” at the slow progress in tackling climate change while Prince Charles bemoans the lack of “action on the ground”. So they need to ask why, for the last twenty years at least, Balmoral has repeatedly failed to follow expert scientific advice to severely reduce overall red deer numbers on their estate and their neighbours. Such a reduction would allow the regeneration of Balmoral’s forest and montane habitats. Regenerating natural habitats and planting trees is vital – but only in the right places.”

The First Minister sat alongside Christiana Figueres at the Macaulay lecture and, in her own contribution, emphasised the importance of pressure on politicians from young activists, including Greta Thunberg from Sweden and Vanessa Nakate from Uganda, both of whom started protest movements through solo actions outside their respective parliaments. They met the FM in Glasgow and challenged her to inject greater urgency into the battle to stop the atmospheric temperature rising above 1.5 degrees. Also speaking at the Macaulay lecture and bringing a wider perspective to the discussions were young climate activists Julieta Martinez, Lola Segers and Anuna de Wever.

The FM co-chairs her Environment Council, alongside Ian Boyd (see above), the main purpose being to advise the government on international best practice in tackling the climate emergency and ecological decline. In Figueres and the members of this Council the FM has the best possible advisers on the land use changes which Scotland needs. In this she might also note the views of Professor Dieter Helm, an Oxford University economist and former chair of the UK Government’s Natural Capital

Committee. He gave the previous Macaulay lecture in 2019 ([see here](#)) and had this to say:

“We have achieved virtually nothing in climate change after 30 years of trying....we cannot go on with the current economic and environmental policies....public money should pay for public goods. The corollary of that is that public money should not be paid for private goods. Almost the entirety of the Common Agricultural Policy pays public money for private benefit. £2 billion is paid to people for the ownership of land providing they farm. If you can think of a worse way to allocate public money I am very interested to learn from it! But the other side of this is the opportunity to do better is immense. We want things that don’t yield private benefit and private return – that’s what business does and what farmers do. We want things that would not otherwise be provided which are part of our natural environment and the systems that go with it.....Think about green spaces.....I think no child should be no more than 500 metres from a green space. I think that is a citizen’s right.”

So one of the main tasks for the FM, post COP 26, must surely be a fundamental reform of the public subsidy system which supports Scottish farming and forestry. We need farmers, living in local communities, to do the tree planting, not financial predators only interested in asset management for far away oligarchs, tax avoiders and carbon off setters. Recognising that Scotland’s public subsidy system for farming and forestry is not fit for purpose is a vital first step for all our politicians. Changing that system will bring immediate benefits as land managers respond to new opportunities to help nature to capture carbon. Delivering a new pattern of land use for Scotland will be an inspiration to all nations who want to capture carbon through the restoration of nature. This is one way for Scotland to deliver a world class legacy from COP 26.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. climate change
2. conservation
3. Deer
4. farming
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