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Managing the uplands: the need for a fresh approach

Lois Mansfield | 17th May 2018



The government promises a 'brighter future for farming'. This should apply to the Upland areas.

Farms here have evolved to provide a lot more than the traditional food, fibre and water. This means a new approach to land management is essential if these areas are to have real social value, argues DR LOIS MANSFIELD

A ten-week government consultation which explores how England will move away from European Agricultural policy post Brexit has recently ended.

The consultation has been far reaching both in terms of content and engagement, recognising a once in a lifetime opportunity to shape the English countryside for the benefit of all.

Among the topics discussed has been the use of public money for public goods - and this is particularly relevant for uplands, where farm businesses often operate on extremely small profit margins. It is not un-typical for a farm to generate a profit margin of £5000 a year - that's 'take home' pay to you and I.

To address this, current and past Common Agricultural Policy upland farms have been supported with a combination of production subsidies, agri-environment grants, diversification funds and structural tools.

This has led to commentators - including George Monbiot - to suggest that such devices have led to an impoverished landscape devoid of biodiversity as farming businesses 'mine' the land.

So why do the uplands justify such support through the public purse? Criticisms such as these have some justification, but the issue is more subtle than that.

Surveys by Natural England demonstrate uplands are some of the most biodiverse environments we have, containing many habitats derived from the very traditional agricultural practices condemned by others.

The issue is not the grazing per se, it's how much grazing goes on. All grasslands can be overgrazed and the CAP has encouraged this, but under-grazing can be a problem too with the build-up of dead plant matter smothering out other more desirable plants, and uncontrolled bracken encroachment.

Biodiversity is just one example of a public good derived from uplands. Other public goods include: flood management, a very real issue for many towns and cities downstream where flooding is becoming more prevalent due to climate change; the

production of cultural heritage through traditional farming practices such as drystone wall construction and other vernacular structures, and carbon storage through effective management of peat and other soils.

Rural communities

As well as public goods, upland farm businesses also produce food - beef, lamb and dairy. They directly support tourism and recreation by providing accommodation, access and activities.

Upland agriculture also maintains rural communities and through them services for other non-farming families. Indeed, it is one of the five cornerstones of the inscription of the UK's latest World Heritage Site of the Lake District in July 2017.

So it makes you wonder why upland agriculture receives such a bad press. While 'bad farming' is often shallowly blamed, there are, in fact, a number of deeper reasons why uplands are not managed effectively as they could be.

The challenges

First, there is the perpetuation of uplands being a marginal domain. This marginality has been re-emphasised in policy, thus rather than celebrating what uplands have it has spent time bewailing what they do not.

Second, at their core, upland land users share resources for multiple purposes. This brings different land users in direct conflict with others who want something else, as well as often not understanding where each is coming from.

Third, land ownership patterns are complex. In a single valley there can be over forty land owners; divided between public, private and in many instances commoners, who have rights of management which supersede the landowner.

Fourth, there are resources in uplands with have complex property rights. Some relate to right of common, as above, others in relation to simple public access along a footpath; or even connected to management, say, of water quality in a reservoir, but the surrounding land may not be under the same ownership. This creates different, complex webs of stakeholders for every single challenge.

Centralised power

Fifth, there is silo management, whereby a single user manages a single land function and thus they do not recognise their effect on other resource users.

Penultimately, there is too much centralised power and control. Many agencies responsible for resource management in uplands operate a 'top down' philosophy. Here external 'experts' come in and tell the local resource managers how it should be done.

Finally, land is not managed in meaningful units. Administrative areas rarely fit natural

physical or ecological units. A single farm can cut across different altitudes, catchments and habitats, but with its neighbours, it may not.

So we really do know what the issues are, the question repeatedly discussed over the last seventy years - how depressing is that? - is how do we make uplands more effective not only at producing public goods, but vibrant rural communities and sustainable land management practices all in one go?

Land use

How do we cut through the structural challenges and make them truly multifunctional? To this we need to transcend the single land use.

We need to approach the issue using resource management rather than land use management. We need to be multifunctional and we need to trust the people who already live, work and manage the uplands.

There are in fact, many schemes operating that attempt to do this. The Pickering 'Slow the Flow' project is a very famous example, where flooding in the town has been tackled through soft landscape engineering in the upper catchment - working with all the stakeholders.

Other less well known ideas include the application of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach in the Peak District where farming families are encouraged and supported to realise all their farm assets to improve their standard of living.

The Northern Uplands Local Nature Partnership is an umbrella organisation bringing together all the Pennines spine National Parks and AONBs to develop holistic joined up solutions across the entire territory.

There are many examples of effective upland management, but the lessons often remain unshared. Therefore, we need a tool kit for upland managers, whether they be farmers, foresters, water managers, commoners, landowners or communities.

My book does this by using a resource management approach supported by a range of real life upland case studies where it really does work. Our uplands are our heritage and our legacy, we need to look after them.

This Author

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