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Reimagining the Lake District

Ian Convery , Simon Stainer , Charlie Gere and Karen Lloyd | 27th July 2020



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It's time to imagine a more resilient future for the Lake District and all its communities, a future in which wild nature and thriving biodiversity is central.

The Lake District is commonly viewed as an unspoilt, natural paradise, an idea supported by its historical connection

with William Wordsworth, British Romanticism, John Ruskin and Beatrix Potter – all of whom are mentioned in the World Heritage (WH) inscription document of 2017.

Yet there is little natural about the Lake District in its current form; it is a product both of the human imagination and of ways of seeing landscape.

The Lake District has been modified by humans for a few thousand years, a mere ‘split-second’ when considered in a geological timeframe. Reimagining this landscape provides an opportunity to restore the dynamic landscape processes that have existed for millennia, and in the process create a landscape more suitable for our changing and challenging age. This creative reimagining is imperative in the context of climate breakdown and wildlife loss. Put simply, much of the Lake District is an ecological disaster zone.



Identity

According to the Lake World Heritage website, the WH designation is based on the Lake District providing ‘inspiration’ for romanticism, fostering the ‘conservation’ movement, and for the ‘identity’ of the landscape.

This is an identity synonymous with the area’s hill farming system, and it is a landscape that many of you will be familiar with; herdwick sheep on the fells, drystone walls, and tree-less vistas. Whilst there is WH recognition of the need for this landscape to evolve, WH guidelines indicate that this change needs ‘to be balanced’ and ‘not threaten’ the reasons for inscription. This is effectively a preservationist approach that will not deliver the radical change that many conservationists are calling for.

World Heritage status is commonly viewed as ‘highly prestigious’ bestowing honour and yet more tourists - on average WH designation leads to a 15 percent increase in tourist numbers. According to The Lake District National Park, 19.38 million tourists visited the Lake District in 2018. At what point do increasing visitor numbers tip over a sustainability threshold, with gridlock on the roads, increased landscape degradation and diminished tourist experience?

We can find no evidence of this being under consideration by either World Heritage or the National Park, which begs the question about there being any kind of handle on the

“ We need to release the iron grip of heritage and romantic sentiment on the rural environment and begin to imagine how else it might look in the future. ”

issue. Growth *per se* is simply not sustainable.’

The WH descriptor asserts that the Lake District property is in a good state of repair. The earlier bid document, however, shows that much of the area’s uplands are in poor condition. The

World Heritage view, therefore, is limited to the ways and means the designation was framed.

Depletion

Ecologists and conservationists working in the Lake District are privately critical of World Heritage even though they may not be able to articulate those concerns in public. Indeed, those same conservationists see World Heritage status as a major hindrance. It has become a blocker to badly needed ecological restoration.

This may seem like an extreme view, but try planting some trees in the Lake District World Heritage area without first carrying out an environmental impact assessment and you will see what we mean (government guidance is reasonably opaque, but any afforestation of up to two hectares in a ‘sensitive area’ requires full EIA screening).

Michael Gove, former secretary of state, said in July 2019 that the UK is ‘among the most nature-depleted nations in the world’. Julian Glover’s 2019 review of English National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty ([‘Landscapes Review’](#)) has indicated that the loss of wildlife from the UK’s National Parks is a matter of urgent concern.

National Parks are currently unable to fulfil their statutory purpose to “conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage” of their areas.

On a global scale we are in a severe wildlife crisis and face unprecedented challenges from human-generated climate breakdown. There is also growing evidence that the outbreak of Covid-19 (alongside similar zoonotic disease emergence and transmission) is at least in part linked to ecological degradation, habitat loss and fragmentation.

Bubble

If we also consider how the wider landscape functions (or rather does not function) in order to reduce the impacts of extreme weather events, then we can argue that the Lake District World Heritage inscription was made at the least suitable time in human history for even considering the notion of landscape preservation.

The WH designation, therefore, is an existential bubble floating through the world but failing to recognise the climate breakdown events taking place all around it.

We know that Lake District farmers are deeply connected to the land and the systems they manage and also that the practice of hill farming has long been a dominating

influence; arguments are already well-rehearsed about the impact of grazing regimes on wider biodiversity.

It is crucial to recognise here that nothing has been formally established to replace European CAP subsidies – the current means of hill farmers' survival. We do know, however, that significant change is inevitable, and any future replacement subsidy system is likely to be markedly different from the CAP (and of course much more vulnerable to the whim of Government). Despite this, a small number of farmers are already transitioning into approaches that include the boosting of biodiversity, which is indeed encouraging.

The likely replacement of CAP will involve 'public money for public goods', and there is an opportunity here to reconsider the role of the park in natural resource management and education, alongside the focus on tourism.

Reimagining

The current LDNP management approach, with a focus on a partnership model where some voices lobby against change in order to protect upland farming and common lands, is not conducive to the current wildlife crisis, climate breakdown, or indeed presenting a meaningful response to the Glover Report. Common lands are important, but they do not necessarily need to contain sheep.

Now is therefore the right time to mediate the space between the various complex layers of stakeholders. It is also absolutely the right time to enable farmers and land managers whose lives and families have been and still form an integral part of the 'ecosystem' of the Lakes with funding to plan and implement the widescale restoration of landscape and its biodiversity – for the greater good. This is not a rehearsal.

So how should this reimagining take place? On the one hand, to try to limit visitor numbers to the area could be economically disastrous and arguably undemocratic. On the other hand, any increase on 19.38 million visitors a year is potentially ecologically damaging and unsustainable.

One solution is to try to change people's perceptions of what the Lake District is; not as unspoilt 'Nature,' or exclusively as a refuge for tired minds, but as an ecology, of which lakes, hills, trees, residents, visitors, houses, roads, power systems and transport are all part, with biodiversity and habitat the crux of the pyramid from which everything flows.

This is not a question of returning to any fixed state of the environment from the past, but rather imagining a more resilient future for the Lake District and all its communities, in which wild nature and thriving biodiversity is central. Here is our offer to you all, and in particular senior World Heritage leaders: join us for an alternative tour of the Lakes and help us to reimagine the Lake District.

Althing

Rather than to dictate terms though, we plan to establish what the philosopher and sociologist of science Bruno Latour calls a 'parliament of things,' an 'object-oriented democracy' in which all the actors in the Lake District can speak or be spoken for.

Latour also suggests that 'political questions have also become questions of nature'. Following Latour, we suggest that it is inherent upon those of us enduring the catastrophe of the Anthropocene to 'include in their politics a whole new ecology loaded with things'.

This notion of a 'parliament of things' is oddly appropriate for the Lake District with its Viking heredity of language, place names and human DNA. Our plan then, is to establish an *Althing* for the Lake District.

The first task of this assembly will be to establish the kinds of coherent questions that urgently need raising. Importantly, this parliament of things will allow nonhuman inhabitants of the Lake District to be given a voice; to have their needs spoken for. The natural world will be granted equal status because inalienably it provides the fundamental underpinnings of human existence.

The Althing will provide the platform from which we can urgently and radically reimagine the Lake District to support *all* its communities - its industries, including properly sustainable tourism, and to help farming transition through schemes for environmental common goods. If funding is secured, Natural England, United Utilities, farmers, RSPB and others are ready and willing to engage.

Utopia

Perhaps all this can only be imagined rather than realised. It may be that the practical obstacles are too great to overcome. But even the exercise of reimagining what an environment is, how it is used and how it might be made more sustainable is valuable.

We need to release the iron grip of heritage and romantic sentiment on the rural environment and begin to imagine how else it might look in the future.

Perhaps we need to rediscover that most unfashionable of mindsets: utopianism. Among the mostly tragic and catastrophic consequences of Covid 19 there is a glimpse of a more utopian vision of the Lake District, one in which the complex environment is given the chance to thrive. This is not William Morris' vision of a utopia realised far in the future, in *News From Nowhere*. This is news from now, here.

If you're interested in getting involved message us at [Reimagining the Lake District Uplands](#) Facebook page.

These Authors

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