

Upland tapestries

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In the second of our articles on rural issues in Scotland, Katy Dickson and Anne Gray highlight the mixture of land use in the uplands and the balance needed to achieve economic, environmental and social objectives

Scottish Land & Estates is an organisation that represents landowners ranging from those with tiny plots of land to others with numerous large estates, and members include communities, charities and private owners. Often with the help of their managing agents, members demonstrate the ability to take a broad, long-term view of land management and adopt an integrated approach.

When considering the long-term resilience of a rural business and making the most of opportunities that land ownership offers, putting all your eggs in one basket is rarely the answer. Our members' estate businesses thus seldom focus on one interest. As Scottish Land & Estates' economic 2012 contribution survey found, most holdings undertake some agricultural activity, maintain some forestry, and play host to some sports, as well as accommodating tourism and housing. More recently, it has become common to find renewable energy generation and telecoms in the mix as well.

This is only to consider members' commercial activity: estate businesses have also been at the forefront of peatland restoration work, and many focus on conservation objectives such as native woodland regeneration, deer management and the survival of endangered or rare species.

Initiatives such as Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels, Scottish Wildcat Action, Heads Up for Harriers and the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project are among those that are well supported by our members. Many estates, totalling an area of 1m acres, are also eager to demonstrate their conservation credentials through our Wildlife Estates Scotland accreditation programme, while most have revised their agricultural and forestry management practices, using precision techniques to reduce run-off and pollution.

Diverse demands

However, society is demanding ever more of our land to help mitigate climate change, improve biodiversity and better manage water to ensure its quality and alleviate flooding, and the uplands are very often the focus of this demand. It will never be possible to achieve everything that everyone wants from every single site; choices need to be made. But land is very rarely used for a single purpose and can offer multiple benefits.

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Commercial forestry is not just about producing timber, for instance; it contributes to flood risk management, offers some benefits to biodiversity and sequesters carbon, as well as providing areas that the public can enjoy recreationally.

In red deer management, landowners work together to plan for healthy populations and reduce the environmental impacts of overgrazing. They often employ skilled keepers to manage the deer, providing much-needed rural jobs and housing that in turn bolster dwindling school numbers and the local economy.

Some offset the costs of their deer management obligations by selling stalking days to paying guests who accompany the keeper, thus creating tourism and additional spend in the area outside the normal tourism season. The carcasses are mostly sold on to game dealers to meet the ever-increasing demand for venison – a low-fat, high-iron meat that is produced sustainably (see [Herd instinct](#) for more on deer farming).

Scotland's Land Use Strategy

The Scottish government has recently published its second Land Use Strategy. Scottish Land & Estates contributed to the development of the strategy, which attempts to find ways to rationalise decision-making about land use.

Many fear that it is a central planning tool, but it is in fact very different. It does not seek to dictate what is done at the level of the individual holding, but instead aims to assist owners and managers in decision-making so that, as far as is reasonable, the most beneficial actions can be taken. Through the regional land-use partnerships advocated in the strategy, it will be possible to get the various interests together round a table for discussion and improved understanding. This collaborative working is something in which Scottish Land & Estates encourages its members' participation.

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The larger estates tend to have estate plans in place already, whereby all developments can be considered together. This, alongside a long-term budget, results in a clear direction for the holding, is a good way of documenting what the estate offers to the rest of society and fits well with the Land Use Strategy concept. It could also inform regional land-use planning. All such plans have to be flexible: the expected outcomes may not materialise for a whole host of reasons and indeed, as we have witnessed, the policy environment can change, so these need to be dynamic documents.

Payment for ecosystem services

The process of preparing such plans should also clearly identify the things that society may wish to see the land provide, but which are not commercially viable and as such need funding support. Taking the example of forestry, while small changes to practice may mean Sitka spruce plantations have less of an environmental impact, there is no doubt that native regeneration can support greater biodiversity. However, this is not a commercial proposition, so society will have to meet the costs of taking the environmentally beneficial approach, a type of funding termed 'payment for ecosystem services' (PES).

Thinking in the medium to long term, however, as pressure on support budgets for agriculture and forestry continues, it makes sense for landowners and managers to consider what can be provided commercially without grant support, and what may be eligible for PES funding. This seems likely to be where available public funding for land-based activity is going to be sourced from in future.

Flexibility for the future

For centuries, a tapestry of land uses has been the norm in the Scottish uplands, although the mixture of activities changes according to individual motivation, policy and public demand. Integrating the management of the different opportunities allows the best use of the land in achieving economic, environmental and social objectives. It is not easy, however, and there will rarely be a point at which a land manager can say they have reached the optimum balance, which is different for each individual.

What we can be sure of though, is there will always be compromises and challenges. It is hoped that the Scottish government will recognise the good practice and use measures such as the Land Use Strategy and PES to support and encourage the continual work to balance a variety of land uses and benefits. These are certainly not the unmanaged empty landscapes that they may first appear to the untrained eye.

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Further information

- The first in the series is [How the land lies](#)
- Related competencies include [Land use and diversification](#) , [Sustainability](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Land journal* (December 2016/january 2017)