

Talking land's language

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Ben Goldsmith was appointed a non-executive director of DEFRA's board in March 2018. Land Journal spoke to him about the department, natural capital and all things environmental

Q: *What is your role in the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA)?* **BG:** As an informal adviser to the secretary of state, I have been particularly keen to make sure that voices not often heard in DEFRA have a say; for example, during the preparation of the Agriculture Bill.

Q: *Part of RICS' role is about valuation. Based on the maxim 'If you can't measure it, you can't manage it,' are we getting overly bogged down in valuing natural capital?* **BG:** In a way I sympathise with the view that there is an intrinsic value to nature, which you can't put a price on, and doing so somehow corrupts our relationship with it. Having said that, the country is moving towards environmental land management schemes (ELMS) in respect of rural payments, under which we will be paying land managers to provide services to the public according to the way they manage their land, so we will have to put an economic value on those services.

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Q: *Do you think the jargon 'biodiversity offsetting, payment for ecosystems services, natural capital itself' stops us from, in the words of ecologist Sir John Lawton, 'just getting on with it'?* **BG:** Yes, there is a place for that language, but perhaps not when you are promoting these ideas to the public. I would rather we talk about the beauty of nature and wildlife in words the public understands when we are trying to get ideas across. Some of the jargon, such as the word 'sustainability', has been overused, and the word 'rewilding' has some controversial connotations. But those working on the creation of new market mechanisms to enable nature recovery do need to use certain technical terms.

Q: *At a recent natural capital investment event, environmentalist Tony Juniper said: 'It is no longer about halting decline, it is about restoring nature.' How do you think chartered surveyors can do that?* **BG:** The way the Agriculture Bill seeks to transform how taxpayers' money is spent in the countryside will I think be the biggest win for nature that we have ever seen in this country. Instead of being handed over to farmers or land managers on a per hectare basis, millions of pounds will be paid directly in exchange for nature recovery. There is going to be a huge role for advisers of all kinds, including chartered surveyors, in helping land managers, individually and collectively, figure out how this is going to work and maximise their income under new schemes.

Q: *Are you saying there's more common ground than we generally hear about between the Agriculture Bill and the 25-year environment plan?* **BG:** I see the Agriculture Bill as the principle source of funding to fulfil the 25-year environment plan. Just to give a small example, if you have got an unproductive corner of a field, which is a hassle to manage as farmland with little financial return under the current schemes, the proposed ELMS approach may provide the incentive to put a pond in that corner.

Q: *Talking of water, does the return of beavers suggest there may be more in common between environmentalists and land managers over conservation?* **BG:** I am delighted that beavers are slowly returning to our landscape after an absence of centuries. I do think that we have a duty to put back the pieces of the jigsaw that we have removed.

Q: *Perhaps in a less antagonistic way, given the tension caused by illegal releases of beavers and other species?* **BG:** When the government seems not to move, some conservationists inevitably decide to take matters into their own hands. However eager the public seems to be, it is important that efforts to restore missing species have the buy-in of local communities. That is critical to the success of any project. I don't know the circumstances around how beavers made it into the River Otter or the River Tay, but I am delighted that it happened.

Q: *Suppose landowners need to manage them?* **BG:** You generally won't find a beaver more than ten metres from water. In lots of countries you are not allowed to farm right up to the water's edge because we know that it causes soil erosion, run-off of nitrates and other chemicals. So frankly I am a believer in backing off from the water a little bit; in which case, beavers are much less of a problem. But of course, there are places where beavers will be an issue and we need to give landowners the right to manage them. If you are farming a high-quality arable holding and beavers interfere with your drainage system, then you have to be able to move them or even to kill them. That stands to reason. In the same way, while the wild boar re-establishes itself in our woodlands, we have got to make sure we hunt it enough. It's just a simple part of playing our role in the environment and being sensitive to the needs of landowners who have a genuine problem. But there is a tendency among the British landowning class to reject outright the notion that they should share the landscape with other species. I think there is a word for this: co-existence. We surely must be able to co-exist with wildlife in a way that other countries do.

Q: *Are we in danger of doom fatigue over biodiversity losses? Is there is more room for optimism to reframe the narrative?* **BG:** I think there are 2 potential sources of good news. The first is modern technology enabling us to farm more productively, with lower inputs to grow food that has less impact on the environment. I am a big believer that the government should be spending more on research and development to help advance the technology, and there is also more we can learn from organic practices. I think there is a huge opportunity for the productive parts of our farming sector to improve in terms of productivity, responsibility and impact. The other source of optimism is in respect of the great blank canvases that our less-productive agricultural land represent ? the great marshes of the East of England and Dartmoor, those places where genuinely productive and profitable farming is just not possible. I think farmers in those places can fare much better by diversifying, with the aim first and foremost of helping nature recover, and food production in those places being a by-product of that work. Active management, including grazing animals, is key to this, with farmers being rewarded by the taxpayer under ELMS.



Invermark, Glen Esk, Scotland: Goldsmith believes landowners in Scotland might do more to make their holdings open to visitors

Q: *In my opinion, environment secretary Michael Gove has been a bit weak on forestry. Where is the leadership in forestry on some of the more marginal pieces of land?* **BG:** I hold with the theories of Professor Frans Vera, who challenges the notion that Europe and Great Britain were once a closed-canopy forest. He says grazing animals had a much greater impact than we have assumed previously, and that wood pasture would have been the norm before agriculture. Human beings like glades, and the wildlife capturing our imagination today such as songbirds and butterflies exists at the woodland edge. An upland landscape of wooded pasture appeals to me. Of course, we must have a commercial timber industry, but I would like it to be continuous-cover forestry with native species, and the commercial sector should be rewarded for the environmental benefits and landscape beauty that it provides. At the same time, let's not renature the uplands with forests planted just for commercial production of wood.

Q: *Is there conflict between the various 2020 objectives for biodiversity and renewable energy, say in conserving upland bird populations in areas earmarked for wind farms?* **BG:** Yes, such policies do sometimes conflict. For instance, elsewhere in the world, the use of oils produced in agriculture ? including palm oil, or rapeseed oil as fuel for cars ? is profoundly immoral because you are stripping the land of natural habitat or food for people. Smaller-scale biomass makes more sense: projects fed by local woodchip as a by-product from mills are great. I would rather see solar panels on the roofs of warehouses ? there are several thousand

hectares of flat roofs in the South East of England alone that could be used for this ? and solar photovoltaic cells in our roads as well, which is an interesting idea I have seen pioneered in France. I also think there is a role for offshore wind.

Q: *Has onshore wind more or less run its course?* **BG:** Potentially, the best sites have been used up and political winds change; but it is about the availability of quality sites.

Q: *Do ecologists get in the way of good hydro schemes?* **BG:** With hydro, the basic rule is about size. Small hydro has lower impact, whereas large-scale hydro dams can have a terribly negative impact by flooding communities, and are difficult to fix once they have silted up ? though given the dire threats that we face from climate change, I would rather have large-scale hydro than coal.

Q: *How do you keep legislation at the gate, to enable innovation to flourish but trusting people not to overexploit? Might an environment watchdog's teeth be too sharp?* **BG:** The watchdog envisaged in the current Environment Bill would have the remit of holding government to account rather than individual farmers and businesspeople, and I do think, historically, the implementation of regulation in the countryside has perhaps been somewhat bureaucratic. There is scope for simplifying life for rural businesses ? it doesn't necessarily mean regulations should be weakened, but I do think the implementation of that regulation can perhaps be done in a more streamlined and simple way.

Q: *Thinking of the Oxford Farming and Oxford Real Farming Conferences, is there more room for the cross-fertilisation of ideas, including better-quality arguments?* **BG:** I totally agree ? there is so much to be learnt from each other. Those farmers farming profitably with lower inputs in the organic movement have knowledge that could help reduce inputs in conventional farming and vice versa. I believe in dialogue and sharing knowledge and information in moving to new ways of farming.

Q: *Do we require rural psychologists to help land managers and farmers make some tough transitions in remote areas of the UK?* **BG:** The average income for small sheep farmers in the uplands is not fair, and the market is not working for them. I think we should assist them to diversify, and pay them for the environmental goods that many of them are already providing. I think they should be paid for the drystone walling, the hedges, pastures full of wildflowers and lots of things they love doing but are not being rewarded for, and encouraged to profit from the enormous number of visitors to those landscapes.

Q: *Should UK national parks become more like Yellowstone Park and charge?* **BG:** No, because Yellowstone doesn't have people living there. But maybe our parks could become more like Asturias in northern Spain, where thriving rural communities are being paid for the physical environment created by extensively grazed livestock and environmental services, such as guiding tourists. Every single farming family in 1 village I visited were doing B&B, supported by a special scheme providing tax breaks for their businesses. The landscape is slowly becoming more interesting, more colourful, more alive and it is working economically, socially and environmentally. Why not aspire to these examples in Europe that have more people, not fewer, than we have in our uplands?

Q: *If you were a large landowner, say a Dyson or a Buccleuch, what would your remit for your property adviser be?* **BG:** It would be entirely different for each of them. As a lowland Dyson, I would push for innovation in my farming to increase productivity, becoming more responsible in having less impact on the environment. I would identify those places on my land where farming is not worth doing, and I would seek environmental services from the land by allowing nature to restore itself. There is space on every farm for a pond or a hedgerow or 2 and an uncut patch. If I were a landowner in windswept Scotland, I would move away from a monoculture of red deer for stalking, seeking to make my landscape a more interesting model

for visitors. It would still include hunting, fishing, shooting but it would also include birdwatching and hiking, cycling, kayaking and glamping. I would also be looking to be rewarded for reducing flooding and income from local authorities for public access. There is a whole bunch of different things we could look at to diversify into in a brave new world.

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Further information

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