

## THE FUTURE FOR THE SCOTTISH COUNTRYSIDE?

### ROGER CROFTS

Earlier articles have flagged up a range of issues that are still needing to be addressed and, hopefully, resolved. Here I take up some of these points from a personal perspective and argue what needs to be done. I take three points as my guiding mantra. First, citizens and government have a collective responsibility for ensuring that Scotland's rich and varied natural and cultural landscapes are well looked after. Second, an equality of opportunity to access and enjoy the outdoors, close to home and further afield, should be a privilege and right for everyone. And, third, that old sectoral mind sets which obstruct broader views, social aspirations and value for the public purse should be banished as outmoded.

To start, we need to have clear visions. Not a single one for the whole of Scotland, as we must recognise the diversity of landscape, of place and of communities. SHN started this process a couple of decades ago with its Natural Heritage Futures, studies for 21 component parts of Scotland and for all the major land uses. It was deliberately visionary and aspirational, reflected consultation with stakeholders, and set out clear objectives for delivery over the next 25 years. So, let's refresh this approach please with integrated strategies and action plans for the countryside, with modern decision-making frameworks involving all stakeholders, as trialled successfully in the Land Use Strategy case studies and in the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere. These indicative plans should be multifaceted, rather than for example just the need to supply land for housing. What is happening around our cities is the loss of the best agricultural land because it is no longer safeguarded since appalling government decisions in 2003. The Greenbelt is being eaten into for the same purpose as if it was an outmoded approach to containing the spread of settlements and maintaining green lungs around our settlements.

It is a well-known fact that most visitors to Scotland regard its scenic beauty as one of the greatest assets and reasons why they come. But, the way we have allowed the landscape to be changed by 'market forces' has totally ignored what visitors think! Industrialisation through insensitive commercial forestry planting and felling, and by wind farms on the most prominent visual locations to capture greater profit for the operators, fish farms in our sea lochs and much more are rife. Yes, this development has a place, but in the right place. This is where the slavish adherence to market forces by successive governments, national and local, have got it so wrong, rather than using the well tried and tested tool of indicative strategies to cope with pressures for landscape change. We know the quality of the landscapes through the detailed assessments made by SNH and local councils a couple of decades ago in the *Landscape Character Assessments*. Let's use this comprehensive and objective information to protect and manage all of our landscape more effectively. And, the government must prepare legislation as a matter of urgency to safeguard the best scenery of Scotland. Currently, the legislation for the 40 National Scenic Areas is ineffective, as if politicians do not care for our finest landscapes!

We must applaud the efforts to get more people to use the countryside in and around where they live, as well as further afield. The medical profession is thankfully recognising the benefits of what I call 'the outdoor pill', rather than prescribing more analgesics and the like. Posters in doctors' surgeries and hospital waiting areas advocating 'don't sit but walk more' are the way forward to improve our health and lifestyles and to reduce the costs of the NHS.

But, if we are going to have more people using the outdoors we must have the wherewithal to help them. The almost demise of the Scottish Countryside Ranger Service and the disappearance of the

Farming and Wildlife Advisory Service are public scandals. We had trained people, a new profession, which was the envy of Europe. Now they are few and far between. Let's revive these important jobs in countryside management and enjoyment.

With the increasing anomaly of the EU Common Agriculture Policy giving money just because people own agricultural land - the Single Farm payment, we need a new approach to helping farmers and land owners look after their land as it is a public good as well as a private asset. I have the perhaps simple-minded view that a Code of Good Stewardship for all of our land should be a matter of public policy and be the determinant of whether owners get any public money for their activities.

At the very least, I hope that we can have reasoned debates about these issues. That is one of the reasons why the RSGS exists!