

STATES OF SCOTLAND: THE NATIONAL REPORT 2003-04 RURAL SCOTLAND AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

Rural Scotland and Scotland's natural environment are usually taken to be synonymous. The Minister for Environment is also responsible for rural development and the key rural economic sectors. Even the new committee structure of the Scottish Parliament seeks to perpetuate this view with the establishment of an Environment and Rural Development Committee. This perspective is erroneous. Examining who pays for, uses, looks after, and needs rural areas gives broader perspective. There is a multiplicity of legitimate interests: we all have a stake in the environment and most of us have some dependency on 'rural Scotland'. The debates and actions during 2003 and 2004 clearly back up this point; for example, on national parks, public access and the right to buy land, nature and community conflicts, on agriculture, and on fishing, forestry and tourism. These six topics are elaborated as they affect citizens in rural and urban Scotland.

I must be honest about my own position. I have lived all of my life in urban areas but have worked on rural development and environment issues for decades. I unashamedly argue for better care of our natural environment for its own sake and for the contribution it brings to improving our life chances now and for future generations.

Widening the basis of land ownership

The debate on who should own the land has been a hardy perennial. The new legislation has righted some wrongs without radically changing the face of ownership. Some traditional interests were taken by surprise perhaps because they thought that the ability for communities to register an interest in their local land would never come to fruition, or so they hoped. Equally, it has been seen by some enlightened owners and some more courageous communities as a great opportunity to do things differently. This reform is far from the radical change that some demanded and others feared. Without a real sense of purpose and leadership from communities and without the support of funds, largely from the National Lottery, we should expect only a limited amount of change of ownership to local communities. Nevertheless, the reform is in tune with demands for restoring traditional rights and responsibilities elsewhere and is a genuine attempt to deliver social justice to rural communities.

The celebrations of 10 years of local ownership success, for example in Assynt, appear to indicate that success can be achieved. But some of the media hype may be masking more deep-seated issues. It is very difficult to achieve commitment and agreement from all members of the community to secure the success of community ownership in the longer term.

Making public access legitimate

The passing of the access provisions of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 has to be one of the great social achievements of the Scottish Parliament. Scotland finally catching up with its Nordic neighbours has to be a cause of celebration wherever you live and work. Can anyone believe

that these reforms would have been passed so easily through the Westminster parliament? I doubt it. Over a century of campaigning by politicians and citizens has resulted in a formal statutory right to be on private land for informal recreation and access, but with legitimate safeguards to property and privacy. The stigma of being potentially in a state of trespass, indeed whether there was a law of trespass or whether there was a de facto right of access, have all been resolved by the 2003 Act.

Owners of land and the access bodies are to be congratulated for bringing the issues into the open and agreeing resolutions. The Access Forum has played a significant role in defining legislative change and codifying good practice. This facilitative approach, involving all of the interests, to debate and resolve issues on which there are many divergent perspectives is a good model.

To owners who fear that their privacy will be lost and providing access will be too costly, my message is not to worry as I and many others like me welcome the clarification of where we can and cannot go with legitimacy and how we should respect the rights and livelihoods of owners. For the reforms to be really successful more public and private resources are needed and greater effort is required to develop path networks.

Celebrating the special national places

One week after the vote for the Scottish Parliament in 1997 Donald Dewar announced that Scotland would have National Parks. The Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park was established in 2002 and The Cairngorms National Park in 2003. They are recognition of Scotland's new national status and, at long last, put us on a par with the most other nations. This is rightly a cause for celebration locally and nationally with a positive supporting chorus from the international community.

Scotland's National Parks have social and economic development roles alongside the traditional roles of nature and landscape conservation and public enjoyment. Ensuring that all of the purposes are delivered is the most important challenge to the park authorities; these areas are not just bastions of nature protection and not just tourism development areas, or enterprise zones.

There are three other tests of success. First, they must make a difference in restoring land degraded over many generations by overgrazing and other forms of mismanagement. This will require changes in the agriculture support regime from food production to environmental stewardship. And it will require a more effective approach to the management of deer by the Deer Commission for Scotland and by owners and managers to ensure that the numbers are finally brought in balance with the carrying capacity of the deer range.

Second, they must make a difference by engaging local interests in the governance of the parks and in ensuring that they benefit socially and financially from its existence. This will require building the capacity of

locals to participate, and providing positive incentives to locals for business development and other activities.

And, third, they must make a difference in balancing effectively national and local interests. It is curious that local interests predominantly manage our new national parks: surely they are for the benefit of the nation as a whole, and that includes visitors to Scotland. If they descend into parochialism because of the imbalance of local interests on the authority and if they ignore the wider cultural, aesthetic and environmental values, then that will be a major disappointment.

I find it misguided that much of the argument has not been about these big issues but about boundaries and planning powers. For sure the extension of the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park into Cowal, and the failure to extend The Cairngorms National Park into Highland Perthshire were unjustified on any objective grounds. The argument about planning powers seems to be dictated by the English situation and bears little relation to the reality that most of the management issues which the park authorities should deal with are well outside the ambit of the planning system.

Resolving conflicts between people and nature

One of the issues which divides rural and urban Scotland is the protection of its wildlife. Much of the opposition is not unreasonably based in rural Scotland where wildlife protection is perceived to be imposed upon owners of land and is also perceived to disadvantage rural communities economically. The rise of various bodies purporting to represent rural interests is a manifestation of this divide. The implementation of the EU Habitats and Species, and Birds Directives by the government through its agency Scottish Natural Heritage has caused debate, argument, opposition and legal challenges. That Scotland has progressed so effectively, given the extent of the area and the number of sites and the dirigiste European approach, is the recognition of the importance of Scotland from a European perspective, the pragmatic approach of many owners and managers, the environmental bodies who quite rightly pressed the case for more areas and greater speed, and is also testimony to the skills of staff in SNH. One key ingredient in making progress has been the implementation of schemes under the Natural Care banner by SNH to provide positive financial support to owners in the management of these important sites. It is pleasing therefore that these positive approaches are to be formalised in legislation just put before Parliament and that the outmoded, unfriendly and uneconomic approaches of compensation for doing nothing are about to be disappear.

The new legislation and support mechanisms, along with opportunities for wildlife tourism, will hopefully bring benefits not only to wildlife but also to those who have the privilege to care for it on their land, those who wish to visit it, and hopefully the rural communities in the surrounding areas.

Farming is more than food production

One of the major issues affecting rural areas and the environment has been the future of agriculture and, more particularly the future role of farmers. Urban communities are also interested given their support as taxpayers for rural areas, especially support for agricultural production and for maintaining 'the fabric of the countryside'. These issues were brought into sharp perspective by the foot and mouth disease epidemic. This had a devastating effect on farmers incomes in the affected areas, ruined generations of livestock development, raised legitimate concerns about some animal husbandry practices, and most significantly brought to the public's attention the importance of access to the countryside for the tourism industry. Thankfully the epidemic is over and the control measures lifted. Hopefully the lessons documented in the many reports will be taken heed of so that any recurrence is minimised.

New schemes for supporting environmentally friendly agriculture, under the Rural Stewardship Scheme, have been widely welcomed by farmers and by environmental bodies. It is clear from the affirmative response from all constituencies that the longstanding Environmentally Sensitive Areas schemes have been successful in galvanising action for the environment and are good value for money. Many habitats, especially wetlands, and many species, particularly farmland birds have benefited, although the degree of success is not as much as is needed according to environmentalists. In addition, it is hoped that the priority given to the Organic Aid scheme will bring benefits to soil quality, and bio safety of food products. Funding for agri-environment work is much less than is required to overcome the effects of long-term intensive production driven by UK and EU food supply policy. It is essential that substantially more resources be provided for environmental schemes on farms: a point which now unites all of the constituencies of interests.

A welcome step has been the debate about the future of Scottish agriculture and the production of 'A Forward Strategy for Scottish Agriculture' and the report of the sub-committee on agriculture and the environment. The implementation of these reports should stimulate alternative activities for farmers, improve the quality assurance of food produced for the consumer, help to develop new markets, and meet some of the environmental targets. It is, however, disappointing that the more radical and progressive proposals put forward for England and Wales have been so unthinkingly rejected by the Agriculture Minister and the Farmers Union in Scotland. At times, it seems that Scottish agriculture has to proceed at the pace of the slowest in the ministry and in the industry rather than at a pace which progressive farmers and the thinking groups within rural and urban communities are seeking.

No doubt the agreement on the Mid-Term Review of the CAP will provoke demand for a different deal and slower implementation for Scotland, when what is need is for the role of farmers to be recognised and supported beyond the production of high quality food. There is little point in just removing the financial support for food production and assuming that farmers and therefore their role in the countryside will be safeguarded. New measures and the redirection of funds to support them are urgently

required. More recognition for farmers role in protecting and improving wildlife, in helping to implement the new access laws, in maintaining the look of the countryside, in helping to achieve the implementation of the new water management legislation on farms are all part of this wider role.

Fishing, forestry and tourism changing direction

There have been challenges for the three other main economic activities in rural areas. These have affected both rural and urban communities.

There can be no doubt that the white fish industry is in crisis. The concerns for the financial viability of the businesses and the longevity of the dependent communities are issues which should concern all citizens. The closure of the North Sea cod fishery to Scottish boats is but the most significant in an industry which seems to be very efficient in upgrading its capacity to find and catch fish, but not very effective in maintaining the balance between natural recruitment to the fish stock and the catching capacity of the vessels. In addition, there are many occasions when fish that are protected or their quotas severely restricted are caught as by-catch and then discarded. New stocks are difficult to find, and fishing those few in remote parts of our waters, for instance on the Darwin Mounds off the Outer Hebrides, have caused damage to the unique cold water corals to the extent that a new solution of banning fishing from the area is being developed. Most significantly, there remains weakness in the market for fish, although there are welcome signs, albeit anecdotal, that the large supermarket chains are seeking to increase sales of fish. There remains competition from the aquaculture industry. Farm-produced salmon is now at an affordable price, and despite many concerns and scares about husbandry, neither the regulators nor the public seem to be deterred from buying its products. Other species are at an advanced state in the development of farming and will no doubt reach the market in increasing quantities in the future.

However, none of these developments brings any salvation to deeper water fisherman and their dependent human communities. It is not surprising that we have seen protests about the closure of fisheries, and the wholesale decommissioning of boats. These measures do not solve the economic and social problems or the fish recruitment and supply issues. At the time of writing, the latest assessments from scientists indicate that the decline in white fish stocks, particularly North Sea cod, is continuing. Many recognise that the science is not perfect but this does not absolve Fisheries Ministers, fishing industry leaders and fisherman from ignoring it or claiming that their own observations are more precise. Indeed, much of the root of the present problem lies in the naïve approach over the years that preserving catch levels is more important than conserving the stock itself. As a result the level of recruitment to the fish stock necessary to sustain the industry in the longer term has not been achieved.

Unlike farmers, it is difficult to see alternative roles for fishermen using their skills. However, developing a range of methods to allow stocks to rebuild are needed: areas where fish spawn and breed should be identified and closed to fishing - a method used successfully in other countries,

stricter controls on by-catch of those species not sought, draconian controls on those crews who flaunt the rules by landing illegally caught fish, and further improvements in surveillance and enforcement of illegal activity by less use of ships and more use of satellite tracking.

Given the low price of timber on the world market, the forestry sector has not had an easy time. However, we are seeing the benefits of the substantial long-term investment in forestry by the state, both in maintaining a supply of homegrown soft wood to the various processing factories and also diversifying the use of the afforested areas for wider public benefit. Particularly significant has been the recognition of the role which the national forest estate plays in biodiversity conservation. Felled areas are now left unplanted, native trees retained, and native species planted. The semi-natural pine, oak and ash woods, in particular have benefited from removal of non-native species in recognition of their unique position in Europe. There has also been further extension of the use of state forests for both informal quiet recreation and for noisier activities. All of these activities have been put in a more strategic context with the impressive forestry strategy for Scotland, led by the Forestry Commission.

In the tourism industry many believe that the lack of leadership from the government agency visitScotland has been at the root of Scotland's failure to compete effectively in both domestic and international markets. This strikes me as blaming the messenger when the standards of service in the industry remain poor, and when brochure production seems to be more important than providing visitors with what they want. The Area Tourist Board structure is convoluted and gives all the appearance of an industry that wishes to stay firmly in a dependence culture rather than improving the range of opportunities, exploiting the strengths which Scotland naturally has, and significantly improving service standards. Admittedly the industry has gone through a bad period with the effects of foot and mouth disease, with the after effects of '9/11', and with the effective competition from Sunbelt destinations. But blaming the agency rather than getting on with the job of looking after visitors has not been the way to succeed.

Overview

Some new alliances have emerged, such as forestry and access, such as environment and tourism, such as urban professionals and remoter rural communities. Inevitably also some of the longer standing issues remain despite progress: the people versus nature debate, the failure to capitalise sufficiently on the sustainable development ethos to bridge the gaps, the myopic attention to fishing communities rather than the long term sustainable management of the natural resource of the marine biomass, finding new roles for farmers which are likely to be financially viable and have community support. Both urban and rural communities have a legitimate stake and are more interdependent than many admit.