

ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY
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Summary statement 13

**Sustainable Futures
for the British Uplands**

Outcome of a conference
held in November 2002

Raising the professional awareness of Geography

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Sustainable Futures for the British Uplands

Outcome of a conference held in November 2002

This one-day conference, held on 20th November 2002, was convened by Dr Martin Price, Chair of the RGS-IBG Mountain Research Group, for the RGS-IBG's Environment and Society Forum. It was chaired by Sir Martin Holdgate, President of the Freshwater Biological Association, former Director General of IUCN-The World Conservation Union, and a resident of Cumbria. The conference drew attention to the key issues to be considered in the British Uplands, whose people and environments face diverse and interacting forces of economic, societal and environmental change, as revealed particularly by the foot and mouth disease epidemic in 2001. Recognising that many of these forces originate outside the UK, the conference was also a contribution to the International Year of Mountains, 2002, whose objectives were to "promote the conservation and sustainable development of mountain regions, thereby ensuring the well-being of mountain and lowland communities".

Key issues

Eight papers were presented at the conference, with a panel discussion towards the end:

- The British uplands in a period of change
Professor Philip Lowe, Duke of Northumberland Professor of Rural Economy and Director, Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle upon Tyne
- Policies for managing change in the uplands
Tom Levitt, MP for High Peak
- The interdependence of upland agriculture, tourism and landscape conservation
John Dunning, Chair, Cumbria Rural Enterprise Agency and Rural Member of Northwest

Development Agency

- The changing values of upland forests
Bob Dunsmore, Highland Conservator, Forestry Commission
- Partnerships to facilitate sustainable development
Pip Tabor, Project Manager, The Southern Uplands Partnership
- Linking conservation and rural economies in the uplands
Professor Ian Mercer, former Chief Executive of Countryside Council for Wales, Secretary General of the Association of National Park Authorities, and recently Chair of Devon Foot and Mouth Enquiry
- The values of water in and from the uplands
Dr Chris Spray, Environment Director, Northumbrian Water
- Investing in sustainable upland economies
David Douglas, Regional Agribusiness Manager, Clydesdale and Yorkshire Bank
- Panel members:
Andrew Humphries, Chair, Council for Agriculture and Rural Life
Dr Nick Sotherton, Director of Research, The Game Conservancy Trust
Professor Des Thompson, Chair, Joint Nature Conservation Committee Uplands Lead Co-ordination Network

A summary follows of the main issues raised.

The historical context

During the 20th century, the British uplands experienced significant changes. At the beginning of the century, they had mixed economies. In the inter-War years, they were regarded as depressed regions with declining

populations. After the Second World War came increases in funding for agriculture and forestry, both regarded as having 'strategic' importance. Recognition of the landscape and recreational values of the uplands increased, reflected in the designation of national parks and other types of 'protected area' and rising recreational use. From the 1980s, livestock production increased, particularly with subsidies from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), but a debate over alternative land uses and how to finance them began. Over the same period, the planning and management of upland forests have increasingly recognised their landscape, recreational, and watershed protection values.

The British uplands are now recognised as multifunctional landscapes, whose communities and economies are subject to many external forces. They are important not only for supporting local economies, but also for providing public goods such as biodiversity and landscape conservation, recreational opportunities, and flood control. 2001 was a year of definitive change, highlighted by the impacts of the foot and mouth disease (FMD) epidemic. While this devastated farming and tourism, it also showed their interdependence, and that recreation and tourism provide far more employment and income than the 'traditional' activities of agriculture, forestry, and fieldsports. Recognising that the value of public goods now outweighs production from agriculture and forestry, new approaches to ensure sustainable futures in the British uplands are needed, with a balance between local needs and national benefits.

Diversity, similarity, and change

Each of Britain's upland areas has distinctive features in terms of its geology, ecosystems, communities and economies. Yet there are many common themes. Upland areas are generally more fragile, in ecological terms, than lowland areas and have generally suffered more from human misuse over the centuries. Yet they retain some of Britain's most important sites for biodiversity. All upland areas are cultural landscapes; their multi-

functional character and multiplicity of stakeholders must be recognised. The uses of these landscapes have changed considerably, and more change is inevitable. For instance, many wind farms are being proposed and constructed, and climate change may not only alter land use but bring pressures for more reservoirs. Policies must recognise the need for adaptation.

Upland people are diverse, and have many interests and interactions. Their communities, economies, and environments interlock in complex ways. Upland communities have strong traditions of self-reliance and cultural traditions which are part of the national heritage and need to be actively fostered, together with the landscapes to which they are bound. However, these traditions are often threatened by the loss of young people and the ageing of indigenous populations. At the same time, incomers, both economically active and retired, are moving to upland areas, finding that intangible advantages such as the attractive landscape, quiet, and opportunities for outdoor recreation outweigh disadvantages such as a high proportion of seasonal jobs, poor transport and communications infrastructure, and limited public services. One outcome is often that property prices rise, making housing unaffordable for locally-born people. Upland communities are interdependent, and are also linked closely to regional centres and lowland communities. For upland communities to have sustainable futures, economic and environmental management systems have to address these interdependencies.

Hill farming remains a way of life that is central in most of the British uplands; though, particularly in parts of northern England and Scotland, forestry and management for hunting are also important. All of these activities are labour-intensive, with little potential for mechanisation. Many of the rewards for farmers and other land managers can not be valued in economic terms. The 2001 FMD epidemic made evident the close linkages between land management and recreation and

tourism, bringing recognition that the latter are now the principal source of employment and income in upland areas, some of which are the closest to wilderness available in the UK. Yet upland areas differ in their potential for various types of tourism. Not all are, or should be, major tourist destinations, and distinctive local opportunities need to be identified, implemented, and marketed.

All of the British uplands have values for people, but these vary for different people, places, and uses. There is a shared need for sustainable use, but this does not necessarily imply diversification. Some areas may best be used for many purposes; others for a dominant primary use. As David Douglas said, “upland areas need to be dynamic: they need to and will change”.

Needs and opportunities

Every action towards sustainability will have to respond to the following needs, recognising that the diversity of situations requires distinctive approaches in different areas:

- To recognise that upland landscapes are living landscapes, formed through the interactions of people with their environments, and certain to change as human activities and demands change.
- To make the best use of the potentials of the uplands, rather than treat them as disadvantaged marginal areas; they are both valuable and exhibit “a complex of vulnerabilities”, to use Andrew Humphries' phrase.
- To sustain the communities of upland areas, ensuring that their people feel a sense of belonging, empowerment, and opportunity. This means understanding how people actually live, and addressing issues such as alleviating poverty, enhancing opportunities for income from different sectors and often in different

seasons, providing affordable housing and dependable services (both public and private), developing ways to keep young people in the uplands, and using modern communications technologies for business, training, and education.

- To recognise that, while the upland economy has many pillars, farming is fundamental in most of the uplands of England and Wales, and much of those in Scotland. We need to sustain forms of agriculture (primarily stock-raising) which maintain the best achievable pattern of landscape and habitats. This requires that these forms of farming remain attractive as a way of life, so that farmers gain both satisfaction and income from raising animals and managing land, often for non-market outputs such as landscape, recreational opportunities, and biodiversity conservation.
- To manage forests in sensitive ways that provide income, ensure protection of watersheds and against flooding, and enhance the conservation of landscape and biodiversity, as well as recreational opportunities.
- To recognise that public benefits are provided in many ways by the management of upland land, including the private management of upland landscapes for fieldsports and the management of common land for grazing.
- To recognise the aesthetic values of the uplands: they must continue to lift up the hearts of their visitors and inspire artists and poets.
- To make investments based on realistic commercial assessments, yet also with the support, or at least the assent, of the urban majority, based on greater understanding of the linkages between the uplands and other parts of the UK. For instance, the management of upland pastures, moorland, and forests significantly influences water quality downstream. Animals

raised in the uplands are fattened on lowland pastures and eaten in cities. Equally, recreation in lowland and peri-urban forests can take the pressure off fragile mountain ecosystems, and the development of housing on brownfield sites can decrease pressures for housing in upland areas. Recognition of such linkages is vital for policies and actions which foster sustainable futures for the uplands.

There have been times of particular opportunity for the uplands. One arose after the Second World War, when new farm support systems were developed and national parks were established in England and Wales. The tragedy of FMD has brought another opportunity, showing the ways in which the elements of the upland economy are intertwined and the need for new forms of support for environmentally friendly farming, as recommended in the Curry Report. Yet the most is often not being made of this opportunity. Many farms are re-stocking and planning to operate much as they did before FMD, and slow policy responses may mean that much of this opportunity has already been lost. There is a need for a new vision, with a strategic focus on areas rather than individual farms, and consideration of business restructuring based on the complementarity of on-farm and off-farm activities. Families who consider themselves as 'farming families' need to know their options, how to balance part-time jobs with different income streams, and to be innovative and opportunistic in finding the necessary resources.

Linking sectors and creating integrated approaches

Both European and British government policies affecting the uplands remain strongly sectoral, with separate departments and support systems for agriculture, biodiversity and landscape conservation, forestry, national parks and other types of 'protected areas', town

and country planning, water resources, etc. There are often duplications or contradictions between the mandates of different agencies, which embody contrasting values and have different incentives, controls, and internal systems. The legislative system is similarly sectoral. These administrative and legislative frameworks may be out of date, and 'silo thinking' can hinder integrated, sustainable development. These frameworks need to be reconsidered, particularly for the uplands: inter-sectoral approaches are necessary, requiring 'joined-up' policies delivered with increased flexibility and imagination. Possibly, a 'lead agency' to coordinate on upland issues could be designated.

Recognising the inter-connections between upland areas and other parts of the UK and even Europe - strategic approaches are needed. For example, there is a need for national strategies and guidelines for renewable energy development that balance this use against others and recognise the diverse environmental, economic, and societal implications of generating energy from wind, hydro, and wood in the uplands. A similar strategy may be needed for water resource management if climate change makes eastern and southern England drier and hotter, bringing new demands for transfers from upland areas. The EU Water Framework Directive may provide a framework for this, and requires integrated approaches.

While national strategies are important, there is also much sense in subsidiarity, allowing decisions that affect a particular area to be made regionally or locally. For instance, regional approaches to public transport bringing together all stakeholders (communities, businesses, local governments, etc.) to agree on what is needed and how it should be supported are vital, recognising that investments in transport are investments in entire economies and ways of life. Strategic investment in food supply chains and marketing can both help maintain local economies and increase awareness of the high quality of food from upland areas. Regional

partnerships, fora, or facilitators are possible means for developing and implementing the necessary vision in democratic and accountable ways, with continuing mechanisms for communications and participation. Joined-up approaches are equally crucial at local level, drawing on local knowledge. Overall, it should be recognised that government funding levels are unlikely to increase; the challenge will be to use resources better.

Structures to address the issues and needs

Institutions to achieve sustainable futures for the uplands will have to accommodate changes in societies, ecosystems, and climate. They will have to be durable and adaptive, particularly because important factors and interactions may initially be overlooked. A number of structures and supporting mechanisms were proposed during the conference.

The experience of FMD has re-emphasised the need for new, joined-up systems for rural support, recognising the interdependence of off-farm and on-farm activities, and their implications for the provision of public goods. Such approaches are needed at regional, local, and farm levels. Their designers must clearly recognise the needs of both national and local communities. This should be linked to a new approach to farm support, through continued reform of the CAP, with the further transfer of resources from 'Pillar I' to 'Pillar II', replacing production subsidies with support for environmental management (including support for appropriate and multifunctional forestry). The aim would be to enable farmers to concentrate on what is best in their own context. Both the Curry report and the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution's report on Environmental Planning proposed clear, simple, integrated procedures based on all-farm plans setting out the ingredients of sustainable futures in management. Payments would come through one Rural Support Agency, rather than a number of agencies, each with its own bureaucracy and forms. Agency officials

need to better understand the complex issues of upland life and work to realistic timescales; for instance, taking into account the relatively short upland growing season.

An integral element of rural support should be improved arrangements for advice and technical support to farmers and small rural businesses, including advice and training in the preparation and implementation of farm and business plans, and the provision of business support. Capacity building is a key element of developing sustainability. Recognising that communal land management remains important in many upland areas, yet existing support mechanisms are not effective in delivering land management with both local and wider benefits, a new orientation and, possibly, new support is needed.

The funds necessary to provide all such support to upland areas must be based on economic valuation systems that put due weight on their environmental assets including intangibles such as landscape quality, value as wilderness or as a distinct cultural landscape as well as the provision of recreation. These will provide vital inputs to decisions on the distribution of incentives and subsidies which ensure that the quality of life of people living in rural areas is maintained and that landowners and those responsible for common land continue to provide public benefits.

At the same time, long-term sustainability requires independence from such financial support through the effective use of the market. This implies the need for investment supported by mechanisms that remove many of the current barriers are coordinated, and provide more positive mechanisms that are easy to understand and use. In particular, innovative approaches are needed to the development and marketing of distinctive local products, which may be based on traditional products or new ideas. This will demand facilities tailored to local needs. Rules and regulations that impede local sustainability need review and modification,

which may have to go as far as Brussels (e.g. for local abattoirs).

Using best practice

Examples of successful initiatives towards sustainability should be widely publicised, so that others can learn from experience and use the essential elements. Copying may not be appropriate, as each locality has a different set of characteristics. Among the 'best practices' mentioned during the conference were:

- 'Caring for a Living Landscape' (Peak District National Park);
- Cumbria's Planning and Facilitation Service;
- the Southern Uplands Partnership;
- transport provision in Gwynedd;
- the Vital Villages campaign (Countryside Agency).

Forestry also offers examples of good practice through its strategies at different scales; numerous handbooks and leaflets are available. Good practice in catchment management and erosion control is also documented. In these and other areas, especially in skills crucial to the maintenance of valued traditional landscape features such as drystone walls, good examples of training schemes need to be publicised.

Publicity is also needed about available grants and investment opportunities, setting out sources of support, conditions, qualifications required, and operational conditions. More efficient paperwork is also vital. A network that puts people seeking to develop a project in the uplands in touch with others with similar experience could be very useful. Such a network, with a dedicated website, could promulgate 'how to do it' guidance and success stories. It should be implemented at the UK level, recognising that one of the outcomes of devolution has been decreased communication between England,

Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. It should also link to wider networks such LEADER+ (European Commission) and the European Mountain Forum.

Conclusion

A sustainable future for any part of the British uplands must be founded on a sustainable and adaptable framework for the people who live there. Yet the uplands are also deeply valued by many who only visit them occasionally, and who do so largely because of their intangible qualities, especially their apparent wildness, natural beauty, and opportunities for outdoor recreation. Planning for sustainability has to address these intangibles as well as more down-to-earth dimensions of employment, services, and economic opportunities.

END

With grateful thanks to Dr Martin Price and Sir Martin Holdgate, for kindly preparing this summary from notes taken during the conference.

This conference formed part of a range
of activities held during
International Year of Mountains



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