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Delivering biodiversity at a landscape scale takes vision

I have been speaking a lot lately about the role that hill farmers and crofters have to play in the delivery of what are known as public goods.

That is, the wider benefits to society – such as flood protection or enhancement of biodiversity - that arise from active management on farms or crofts.



The most recent event was a conference in Edinburgh focussed on biodiversity conservation, where I was asked to speak about working with land managers to deliver biodiversity benefits at a landscape scale.



The landscape scale element is essential as many of our biodiversity concerns in Scotland, such as addressing marked declines in upland birds like curlew and black grouse, will require action from multiple land managers to provide the range of different feeding, nesting and wintering habitats needed by the birds within any one area.

I was asked to speak about what needs to change in Scotland to get greater buy-in from hill farmers and crofters to deliver at a landscape scale. And I was also

asked to suggest what type of agri-environment schemes might be needed in the future to allow this to happen

My response to both these questions focused on what I call the Four Fs – Funding, Focus, Flexibility and Facilitation.

Clearly appropriate levels of Funding being available is essential if farmers and crofters are to be encouraged to engage in biodiversity management. But simply being paid do something, such as put grazing animals on an area of ground for a particular length of time or cut a field by a certain date, does not on its own ensure that farmers and crofters are buying-in to what they are doing. Nor that they understand why it is important to do that management at that particular time.

So funding is largely pointless unless the Focus is clear. And by focus I mean on two levels. It needs to be clear what the farmer or crofter is being paid to do and why. But, just as importantly, it also needs to be clear how the desired biodiversity outcomes can be achieved on that particular farm or croft.

For example, on two different hill farms the overall common focus might be to provide suitable feeding habitat on inbye ground for curlews. But on one farm this might be best achieved by applying lime on part of the inbye fields to increase the likelihood of insect prey being available in the soil for the birds. But on the other farm it might be best achieved by increasing grazing pressure to open up dense vegetation to ensure the insect prey is accessible to the birds.

That might appear to suggest that management for a bird like the curlew is likely to be quite complex. And to some extent it is. But when you step back and think about what actions might be best to do at the level of an individual farm or croft, then it becomes much easier to see what may - or may not - be achievable. And hence where it may - or may not - be most appropriate to target those actions on that site.

That brings me on to the third and fourth Fs, which are Flexibility and Facilitation.

The needs of some bird species - such as corncrake and corn bunting – have been well served over the years through standard, prescription based agri-environment schemes. This is not only because the needs of both these bird species have been well understood through research, but also because what needs to be done on farms or crofts for these birds is relatively simple to put into practice.

For example, provide early cover at the margins of fields for corncrakes and cut the fields they are nesting in late in the summer. Or in more arable areas, provide seed resources across the farm for corn bunting to forage on a different times of the year.

But for many of the other bird species we are concerned about their needs are a bit more complicated. Taking the curlew example from above, they need a mix of habitats to provide for their needs throughout the year. So even on a suite of neighbouring hill farms it is likely that different combinations of management actions might be required across different parts of that farmed landscape at different times of the year.

That is where Flexibility within individual schemes is needed to ensure that the differing management actions needed across the farmed landscape, or within individual farms, can be accommodated to best effect in order to achieve the desired outcome.

To-date, we have been reasonably good in Scotland at ensuring some form of focussed funding is available. But looking forward, we need to ensure greater flexibility in how agri-environment management is implemented.

But we also need to recognise that farmers or crofters on their own are not always best placed to understand the needs of birds like the curlew. That is where Facilitation becomes essential.

And in most instances that will not just involve a conservation advisor being able to draw up a plan of what may be most relevant to do on individual farms or crofts. To be truly effective, that facilitation will need to involve ensuring that appropriate advice and guidance is available throughout the length of time that the conservation management is being implemented.

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