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Education is the key to knowing the lie of the land

Climate change and changes to UK and Scottish Government policy following Brexit will drive major changes in upland land management. And these will impact positively or negatively on the delivery of public goods, the wider benefits to society – such as flood protection or carbon capture from woodlands and peatlands - that arise from active management in the uplands.



But different people have different preferences and will perceive the impacts of these changes differently. As part of ongoing Scottish Government funded research, we held a workshop to explore these differences in perceptions and to see whether there might be some form of upland management which most people view favourably.

We used Kirkton & Auchtertyre farms as a case study and – following a methodology developed by the James Hutton Institute - provided workshop attendees with an estimate of public good delivery under five different scenarios.

The past scenario was based on 1995, when the farms were much more intensively grazed by livestock. The present reflected our move 20 years ago to more extensive grazing and the expansion of native woodland. And the three hypothetical scenarios focused on the impacts by 2040 of either allowing rewilding, expanding productive woodland or integrating land management on the farms.

There was a general preference for the integrated land management scenario – involving a mix of sheep and cattle grazing, forestry production, renewable energy generation, wildlife management and tourist accommodation provision.

But what would such a move actually mean in practice for an individual land manager? Especially as it is far too much to expect any one individual to develop a detailed understanding of how to integrate all those different elements onto a farm.

Nevertheless it is the land manager who is best placed to know what it is they want to achieve from integrating additional land uses. And so she or he needs to have more than a cursory knowledge of how well - or not - these could be integrated into their farming system.

But that contrasts with how Colleges and Universities currently educate the land managers of tomorrow, where the current practice of splitting students wholly into forestry, agriculture, countryside management or other sector based cohorts is not helpful.

Simply highlighting the need for integrated land management is therefore not enough. We also need to put in place the building blocks to allow this to happen. Going forward we need to ensure that every land-based sector student – irrespective of the primary focus of their qualification - also has a much better understanding of the constraints and opportunities facing other land use sectors.

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