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Hill farmers and crofters have a key role to play in Scotland

I have spent a lot of time over the past year talking about the challenges – and opportunities – facing hill farming and crofting in Scotland.



No matter who I am talking to I normally start by highlighting that Scotland is unique in Europe in having between 60% and 70% of its total agricultural land under rough grazing. So a very large proportion of Scottish farming is constrained by poor land. And of course, the further north and west you go the more rough grazing dominates any one hill farm or the common grazings associated with crofting townships.

This coupled with increasing climate change and associated pests like ticks and liver fluke mean that there are major productivity challenges facing hill farming and crofting, especially - but not exclusively - in the Highlands & Islands. And with Brexit rapidly approaching – and with each new model of theoretical scenarios suggesting that major changes in support levels are inevitable – then it is easy to think that there may be little future going forward for hill farming and crofting.

But it is also essential to look at the rough grazing figures from a different perspective. The fact that between 60% and 70% of Scotland's agricultural land is under rough grazing means that hill farmers and crofters are the principal managers of a huge proportion of Scotland's agricultural land. As such they have a key role to play not only in maintaining good quality food production but also in maintaining a wide variety of habitats and wildlife species and in providing a wide range of other public benefits to society. For example:

- A decline in upland birds has been evident across Scotland since 1994, with some species like curlew and lapwing undergoing major declines in populations. A combination of changes in habitat management and condition (in some places associated with increases in grazing pressure but in many others associated with marked reductions in livestock over the last decade) and increased pressure from predators (especially from foxes and crows during the breeding season) have been identified as the major constraints on wading bird populations. A new *Working for Waders* Initiative which I co-chair is seeking to encourage landscape scale management to help address these declines. It is recognised that active management by hill farmers and crofters will have a crucial role to play in that process, particularly with regard to

restoring appropriate grazing levels in grassland and moorland habitats previously used for nesting and feeding by these birds.

- Flooding is a major concern in Scotland, with around 240 areas (primarily but not exclusively in the lowlands) being identified as being at high risk from flooding. There will be a major role for upland land managers to undertake appropriate management to help mitigate flooding downstream. Peatlands cover more than 20% of Scotland's land area and have the potential to be an important carbon and water store as well as internationally important wetlands. However, it is estimated that over 70% of peatlands in Scotland have been damaged to some degree and therefore are not only a source of climate-warming greenhouse gases but also have a markedly reduced capacity to store water and support biodiversity. Scotland has a target to restore 250,000 ha of degraded peatlands by 2032, which will require not only support from public and private funding but also active land managers capable of undertaking the restoration and follow-up habitat and grazing management.

Upland and managers have a huge role to play in helping tackle these environmental issues on behalf of wider society. However, many of these environmental concerns are in parts of Scotland which are especially sparsely populated and where demographic projections indicate declining populations over the coming decades. There is therefore a need to carefully consider what type of support mechanisms may be most appropriate to maintain active populations in rural areas capable of ensuring multiple agricultural and environmental benefits from such integrated upland land management systems.

Key going forward will be to ensure that the fact that hill farming and crofting provide such a wide range of public goods is communicated to the wider public. We at Kirkton & Auchtertyre certainly have a role to play, but there is also a need for all hill farmers and crofters to help raise much greater awareness of the environmental benefits that active hill farming and crofting delivers in practice.

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