

McCracken, D. 2019 Key to tackling rural conflict is understanding. *Press & Journal*, 29th October 2019. https://www.pressreader.com/@DavyMcCracken/csb_rIskWh19oLy2m1LlImMcoQNRgBZge-xWYq8zEaMmtWiOzLq-j5gQLZFDTgjrUtrT

Key to tackling rural conflict is understanding

I am a member of the National Sea Eagle Stakeholder Group. A recent meeting in Fort William got me thinking about the range of conflicts between hill farming, crofting and nature conservation that are live in Scotland today.

In Fort William, one of the attendees suggested that input from someone experienced in conflict resolution was required. But for me, conflict resolution is primarily needed to help ensure that all affected parties are willing to sit around a table and discuss the issues at hand.



This is essential to obtain recognition from all that there is actually an issue that requires addressing. But it is also needed to provide those around the table with a better understanding of the views of 'others' and why they hold those views.

Although more could always be done, I would say that we have reached that point with the sea-eagle. The farming and nature conservation stakeholders around the table do recognise that there is a conflict to address.

The key constraints going forward are really legislative (dictating what can and cannot be done), political (dictating what can and cannot be acceptable) and financial (dictating what can and cannot be afforded). None of those constraints will benefit from traditional conflict resolution approaches.

Just as importantly - irrespective of whether the focus is on sea-eagles, geese or ravens - the media attention given when such conflicts arise can send the message that hill farmers and crofters are constantly at odds with nature conservation. This is very far from the truth.

There is therefore a pressing need for greater recognition that active management by hill farmers and crofters is essential if we are to maintain many of the open habitats and species – such as lapwing and curlew - that we put high nature conservation value upon.

The design of future support mechanisms needs to recognise the role that farmers and crofters play in maintaining and enhancing biodiversity. But there also needs to be greater recognition that some of those wildlife success stories will ultimately result in a degree of conflict with farming and crofting.

Future support therefore needs to ensure from the outset that there are also mechanisms in place to help address such conflicts when they inevitably arise. Many – if not all - of the conflicts we now see have come about because the latter was an after-thought, put in place reactively as opposed to proactively.

Davy McCracken
Head of SRUC's Hill & Mountain Research Centre