

Written submission from Scottish Land and Estates

2020 Challenge for Scotland's Biodiversity: Route Map to 2020

Scottish Land & Estates members are responsible for managing large areas of land and therefore have a key role to play in helping achieve the aims of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy. Scottish Land & Estates is engaged in the established biodiversity processes and takes the opportunity afforded by the Committee's examination of the Route Map to highlight a few key points.

Land managers are critically important to success

The majority of land in Scotland is managed by farmers, foresters and sporting land managers and the way that these people manage the land has huge implications for Scotland's biodiversity. These people are running businesses and their actions are shaped by financial pressures, changing markets, their own skills and changing government policies. Yet land managers do not appear to be at the very heart of the Route Map or Strategy. There is reference to using policy tools and developing initiatives that will influence land managers, but this is not the same as putting land managers at the heart of the strategy.

Part of the problem is that while land managers are critical to achieving the aims of the biodiversity strategy, land managers and conservationists tend to occupy different worlds. There needs to be much greater effort on the part of conservationists and biodiversity policymakers to understand land managers' perspectives and to find ways of achieving biodiversity objectives in ways that align with what land managers are doing and seeking to achieve. If conservation is seen as an impediment or a hurdle to land manager objectives (and, ideally, it should not be), the delivery of biodiversity outcomes will be minimal. Conservation delivery has to be made relevant to land managers business plans and day to day work; currently it is all too often fairly academic and distant from land managers' daily concerns.

The natural capital agenda has promise, but needs to become tangible

The natural capital agenda offers a potential mechanism to bridge the gulf between land managers and conservationists because it could provide a way of aligning the desired outcomes of both. Historically, advances in food production, or other outputs from land, have tended to be achieved at the expense of the environment. This happens because when the land manager produces for markets that provide financial reward (growing crops, rearing livestock or producing timber) other outputs from the land, which tend not to be recognised in markets (such as environmental goods and services), are not to be maximised precisely because they are overlooked by the market—they do not have a price or monetary value. The Payment for Ecosystem Services element of the natural capital agenda has the potential to ascribe value to previously under-valued public goods and in this way bring them into the calculations of land managers. There are examples, such as the Woodland Carbon Code, which move in this direction, but we need more tangible examples that allow land managers to realise diverse income streams in ways that can enhance the biodiversity outcome at the same time.

Nature conservation costs money, but budgets are reducing

Many land managers are keen to engage in conservation activity and do deliver public goods, from which society as a whole benefits, at personal cost. Frequently private investment in land management delivers biodiversity benefits without the necessity for public expenditure. But the delivery of environmental public goods does cost money and the government rightly devotes large amounts of public money to incentivise the enhanced delivery of conservation objectives. Budgets are, however, declining. The SRDP budget for 2015-20 is less than the previous SRDP, for example. So just at the very moment we might need to be spending more to meet the 2020 Challenge, we will be spending less overall. It is true that there are some innovations in the new SRDP that are intended to improve the delivery of biodiversity outcomes (such as targeting and better advice), but if we look critically at what the last SRDP achieved for biodiversity (limited progress), it might be more realistic to expect that the biggest step change required is in the funding available. This will not be forthcoming to the extent needed to make real inroads into the challenge we face.

Leadership from government is critical

Although nature conservation is obviously about protecting nature, the achievement of that goal requires action by people. The most important element of nature conservation is not actually nature; it is people. Nature conservation is a social process. Unfortunately, the current social context, especially with regard to the relations between land management and nature conservation organisations, is at present unfavourable for achieving much progress on biodiversity issues. This is because the different organisations are all too frequently antagonistic to one another. This means that while we need to be pulling in the same direction to make progress towards the aims of the biodiversity strategy, we are actually divided and making limited progress.

There are some key wildlife management issues that are, and will remain, contentious and which will probably need to be addressed separately because different parties will struggle to agree. But there is much that we can agree on. What is needed is leadership from government to bring people together. This will not be achieved by creating another forum or biodiversity process; what is needed is sophisticated and ongoing political leadership to build bridges and hold the ring so that better relations can be re-established and more progress made.

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