



Scottish Natural Heritage Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

All of nature for all of Scotland
Nàdar air fad airson Alba air fad

Scoping a strategic vision for the uplands – key questions for discussion

Introduction

In March 2016 the Scottish Government published Scotland's second Land Use Strategy, which provides a high level vision for land use in Scotland from 2016 to 2021 (<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Environment/Countryside/Landusestrategy>). The Strategy set out a Vision, Objectives and Principles for Sustainable Land Use, and contained a number of policies and proposals which provide a programme of action for the next five years.

Proposal 5 indicated that the Scottish Government would “scope the potential to develop a strategic vision for the uplands, exploring the multiple benefits they provide and how they can contribute to climate change targets”. A strategic vision would be a high level aspirational statement about the benefits that we want the uplands to provide for Scotland, both now and in the future, and the balance of land uses that we need to achieve this.

Several key messages emerged from consultation on the draft Strategy, including:

- strong support for this proposal, with 84% of contributors agreeing that a vision could help to determine land use priorities in the uplands;
- recognition of the diversity of upland land use and the need for clear links to other policies relating, for example, to moorland, forestry and wild land, and;
- a view that the uplands should be clearly defined for this purpose.

A more detailed review of the responses can be found at <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/03/6371>.

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has been commissioned to lead this scoping process and report to Ministers by the end of 2016. ***It is important to emphasise that we are not attempting to develop a vision at this stage. The aim of this process is to consider what a vision would need to address, how it could be developed and who should be involved. This will allow Ministers to decide whether or not to proceed with the development of a vision for the uplands.***

As part of the scoping process it will be important to obtain the views of key stakeholders, and we would therefore welcome any thoughts on how this task could be approached. Some key questions to consider are listed below.

Where are the uplands?

1. What broad characteristics should we use to define the uplands? Some possible approaches are summarised in the annex to this note.

This seems a bit of an odd question given that you've already provided information on a range of approaches. Might a better question be, what is the best approach for defining the uplands? Underlying the aim of developing a strategic vision for the uplands is the implicit assumption that there is a suite of land with similar conservation issues which could all benefit from some form of collective strategic vision. So the approach to defining the uplands must encompass this group of areas. Consequently purely geographic criteria probably won't be of any use – upland type management systems, which would have some of these conservation issues, occur at low altitude on relatively flat land for example in areas of the western isles. In terms of selecting areas with similar management issues, then the key thing may be to look at vegetation and land management types,

However, a key challenge for this project is to engage with local communities. We would stress the importance of how we give ownership to communities within the process and the need to work with many groups with differing agendas. Any division of land into fixed geographic zones will always have a slightly arbitrary nature, and 'uplands' is no exception. Where there is a political imperative to focus on a land category, a definition that will mean something to the very communities we want to take part, and to lead, is essential. There is a clear risk of excluding/alienating people by using geographic criteria which exclude their land/communities.

What benefits do the uplands provide to Scotland?

2. What are the key social, economic and environmental benefits that the uplands provide for Scotland?

Conservation benefits – particularly species, habitats etc.; carbon storage through peat formation; water provision and regulation; recreational service including hunting; sense of place and identity; forestry. It might be helpful to explicitly frame these within an ecosystem service framework, which would enable you to capture the wide range of services provided by upland systems, some of which – according to ecosystem service typologies – do not themselves deliver direct benefits to society (e.g. regulating services).

3. How can upland land use help to prevent or reduce the impacts of climate change?

The impacts of global change are obviously felt at a range of scales.

Upland land use can help reduce the global impacts of climate change by contributing to climate change mitigation, e.g. through peatland restoration, or the development of renewables (hydro of varying scale as well as wind turbines, possibly also timber growth for fuel on lower altitude areas).

Climate change will also impact within the uplands, and perhaps we should be considering how to manage for resilience in the face of climate change. This might be resilience in the habitats that deliver services and benefits, but more widely it might mean managing for resilience in the economics and communities of the uplands. Changes in upland land use might result from climate change (e.g. the development of wind farms, expansion of more intensive agriculture) – such alternative land uses might increase societal resilience by buffering upland communities from the loss of other income streams.

What should an upland vision include?

4. A strategic vision could inform decisions about the balance between different land uses in different parts of the uplands. What are the key choices that an upland vision should address, and why?

The above question assumes from the start that there are conflicts between choices and a need to segregate different land users and uses, but shouldn't the process of developing a strategic vision explore whether it's possible to reach agreement on a shared vision for the uplands?

A vision for the uplands would also need to consider how people living away from upland areas want the land to be managed and what they want the land to deliver; this relates to immediate provision of services downstream in catchments (e.g. water supplies) and the more nebulous issue of existence value for those living away from the uplands.

5. Are there any other topics or issues that should be included in an upland vision, and if so why?

What we're going to do with CAP money? What are the government's priorities for the uplands? Can we make the uplands more accessible (and would we want to)?

6. Are there any topics or issues that should be excluded from an upland vision, and if so why?

It could be dangerous to exclude issues from an upland vision as it might at the same time exclude and alienate particular stakeholder groups.

How should the vision be developed?

7. Which stakeholders do you think it would be particularly important to involve, and how? Would particular approaches be needed, for example, to reach particular groups?

A potentially endless list. Land owners and managers, businesses both downstream and benefiting more diffusely (e.g. tourism), general public, government – multiple sectors (farming, climate change, tourism, environment), NGOs.

8. What are your views on the process that might be needed to bring together the key interests and develop a shared vision?

It's going to be complex and time consuming, but if it can be done then it would be excellent and might set a bench mark for other visions (lowlands, marine, woodlands). It could potentially also save money in the long run (by cutting management conflicts and providing all actors with clear unified goals). But adequate resources really need to be pumped in to make it work – no-one should be under any illusion about how difficult it will be.

9. Who would be best placed to lead this process?

Perhaps an independent panel made up of people from across the range of interested stakeholders? SNH might be seen to have vested interests, and also to be unpopular with some key stakeholder groups, but perhaps they could do the leg work which is overseen by a panel?

10. What form should a vision for the uplands take (visual or descriptive, maps, diagrams or text)?

Probably would need all of those, e.g. maps, and accompanying diagrams which provide an explanatory narrative.

11. Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

The impacts of many of the key drivers of upland environments have been known for some time; for example the combined ecosystem impacts of heavy grazing and burning were known 50 years ago. Given the slow apparent rate of progress in terms of tackling these impacts, an upland vision remains desperately needed. The role the SBS Science Support Group might play (if it would be helpful) is to ensure the best use of the available science to support the upland vision to achieve Scottish and global biodiversity targets.

We'd also like to stress again the importance of engagement in this process. Connecting people to the issues and giving them a stake in the conversation is often central to delivering good outcomes in conservation and land management. If we have a shared land use vision for Scotland, then at the action level we need empowered and engaged people to coalesce around shared problems in which they have a clear stake and so can find a joint solution, e.g. the management of the land around a river catchment or deer numbers in a particular landscape.

Finally should any vision be sub-divided into smaller spatial units, e.g. on a catchment level? This would help connect upland systems to the communities that receive benefits downstream, and might account for variation in the key issues for the uplands across Scotland. In addition a catchment approach would get the conservation and sporting interests on board with planners and farmers downstream.

SNH
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Annex: Where are the uplands?

Introduction

Many parts of Scotland could be said to have an upland character, including the extensive hills and moors of the Highlands & Islands, the lower hills of the Central Belt and the rolling landscapes of the Southern Uplands. During consultation on the draft Land Use Strategy, a number of respondents suggested that any vision should be based on a clear and widely agreed definition of the uplands. This short note considers some ways in which this could be achieved.

General considerations

A suitable approach to defining the uplands must be clear and robust, and attract broad support across different land use sectors. The chosen approach will need to work at an appropriate level for strategic decision-making and avoid fine-grained debate about the status of small marginal areas. The definition should also be easy to understand without a map, but should lend itself to mapping if needed (at a level of detail that is consistent with its purpose).

Many communities are closely linked to upland areas and rely on the benefits that the uplands provide, and there might therefore be a case for including these communities within the definition of the uplands. This might not, however, be straightforward in practice, as different communities form a continuum and relate to the uplands in a wide variety of ways. While these links are perhaps clearest for small rural communities, some major cities, such as Edinburgh, could also be said to have strong links to nearby hills such as the Pentlands. An alternative approach might therefore be to use a relatively narrow and robust physical definition of the uplands and ensure that the vision clearly captures the importance of this resource to a wide range of communities.

Some possible approaches

- The simplest way to define the uplands might arguably be to base this on **altitude**. This would be easy to map, although it would not be easy to identify a single threshold altitude that makes sense in all parts of Scotland. This is particularly true in the north-west, where land with an upland character often extends down to sea level.
- The uplands are often defined as land lying above the **limit of enclosed farmland**. This approach might attract reasonably broad agreement and could be based on existing data. This boundary is usually also fairly obvious on the ground.
- It is possible to envisage various other ways in which the uplands could be defined, for example according to upland **vegetation cover**, **climate** or **land capability** classes (<http://www.soils-scotland.gov.uk/data/lca250k>).
- It might be possible to define the uplands on the basis of landscape qualities, for example based on **landscape character types**, although some further work may be required to achieve this in a consistent way across Scotland. There might also be scope to use other landscape criteria such as **remoteness** or **ruggedness** of terrain, although these would not necessarily capture all of Scotland's uplands.
- There might be some scope to use administrative boundaries such as **local authority areas** or the **Less Favoured Areas** (LFAs) that are used to help target agricultural

support, although these approaches might tend to include areas that are not necessarily upland in character.

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