



*Safeguarding public access in Scotland since 1845*

Mark Wrightham  
Scottish Natural Heritage  
Great Glen House  
Leachkin Road  
INVERNESS 1V3 8NV

Dear Mark

### **PROPOSED VISION FOR THE UPLANDS**

1. Many thanks for the opportunity to contribute to the proposal for a '*Strategic Vision for the Uplands*' as part of the wider debate about a Land-Use Strategy for Scotland. We welcome this proposal, but for reasons set down below, we can only offer a cautious welcome: it is our experience over many decades that governmental policy initiatives aimed to develop productive uses for Scotland's hills and moors have only had adverse effects on the purposes for which ScotWays exists, namely the enjoyment of open-air recreation and to safeguard the landscapes that are at the heart of this enjoyment. Your letter sets out a number of questions that are properly probing in looking for the best way forward. But most of these questions are broad in their content and difficult to answer in a limited response, so we will focus on the implications for our own purposes.

2. We have a more general introductory point, to query how this new vision might be used. The second Land-Use Strategy already has a vision (at page 7), which is set out as a concise and general over-riding statement, supported by three objectives that are good in their breadth but still generalist, and this top-of-the-pyramid introduction is also preceded by three purpose-based statements on page 5. Then the text moves into a series of analytical statements, some being either issue or process-based, while others are sectoral or more geographic in their application, including the Uplands text – the starting point for the present exercise. It is not clear where the proposed vision statement for the uplands will fit in, but we assume (because of the breadth of the issues) that it will have to be an analytical document (rather than a short headline statement) and which may or may not connect with where we are with the land-use strategy venture.

3. *Defining the Uplands* This is a difficult question: our instinctive response is that (for a number of reasons) there can be no precise definition, but that it would be helpful to have a map that provides a common understanding of the extent of the uplands, this as a basis for ongoing discussion. The Land Use Capability map is one starting point because it identifies land of low and very low productive value, but such land might well be integral to the use of adjacent better-quality land, so there will very often be a fuzzy boundary. Essentially, debate on the uplands is about land of low productive value, most of which will have a near-natural vegetation cover, and the reality is that this may cover up to 60% of the land area. At the

present stage of debate over principles and generalities, having precise data on the extent of the uplands is not necessary.

4. *Benefits of the Uplands* Again this is a difficult question because of regional differences, different cultural contexts across the nation, as well as different climatic and terrain influences: and there are ongoing political sensitivities over land-use issues. Over the years, debate about land use in the uplands has rested too much on the role of the uplands for the conventional land uses, and such debate has always been poor in recognising the intangible attributes and values that make our uplands special for the wider population, and for the nation. This debate, including much effort to resolve the historic, economic problems of the remoter areas, also tends to be less focused on the real physical limitations (soils, climate and the like) to economic gain. Thus, use of the word 'benefits' has always to be qualified by the limitations, and these limitations can be severe.

5. From our own stance the key attributes of the uplands of benefit to the nation are as follows:-

- Scotland's uplands are special and they are an important part of what makes living in Scotland special. The prime public interest lies in our landscapes, which are varied, often of high quality, and ranging from the softer settings of southern Scotland to the austere, spacious and wild terrain in the north and west, and many of these settings have national significance.
- Many of these landscapes have high recreational value, serving communities, and as a prime attraction for visitors.
- Distinctive habitats and wildlife are also an important part of the landscape experience and there is much here that is of national and international significance; and there are important cultural elements that may not get sufficient recognition.
- Appreciation of our landscapes involves values as much as physical attributes, these being the values that people hold for places where they live or come from, and more generally, the values people hold for their attachment to Scotland's beauty and its role in our national identity.

6. In short, there is for this significant part of Scotland's land area a wide public interest, which has not been properly heard so far in debate about the rural land use strategy, and which is not really represented through the ecosystems approach. At the initial meeting for this venture, held at Drumossie in late 2009 there was a more open approach to recognising this wider public interest, which appears to have been somehow lost in the subsequent more technical debate. In our view, it is time to step back to take a broader view on this venture and the breadth of the community it should serve.

7. In thinking about benefits, there may a need to challenge some of the orthodoxies in upland land-use. Data on employment in the upland areas usually show that the percentage of people directly employed in the traditional land uses is surprisingly small. That is not to deny the importance of what these jobs contribute: but it is a measure of change over the decades to upland rural economies, such that most are now much less about land use and its production and more service based, whether public or private. Similarly, afforestation has

for long tended to find space on marginal exposed lands: if we want to grow quality timber, then forestry should be able to find more space on lower and sheltered ground.

8. A second element (3) to this question asks about mitigation of climate change. It is not clear what is intended here: while a conventional response might reach for the planting of more woodland or greater care for peaty soils, this also looks like a question to test obliquely attitudes to introducing more wind or hydro-power development. The current drive towards wind-power has created significant impacts on Scotland's upland landscapes, both in remote settings and close to where most people live in central Scotland. This kind of development is not yet evident everywhere in the uplands, but significant concentrations of turbines now exist across our uplands through some very large wind-power developments, or from the cumulative effects of adjacent schemes. Elsewhere, there is enough scattered development of this kind to link together the big concentrations: so the visual spread of this kind of development is rising. It is often argued by the wind industry that the public either favour wind farms or, if visitors, that they would be undeterred from returning. No weight should be placed on any such claims, as they are based on poor quality or out-dated research, and they are arguments of the moment, with no predictive value over the future impacts of more such development.

9. Wind power development is at present in a state of uncertainty: however, given a likely return in confidence (once government policy settles down) any revival of onshore wind development is likely to involve bids for expansion of development, also taller turbines, located in higher and more blatant locations. After a freewheeling and subsidy-based approach to wind power development, we need an approach of strong restraint and a strategic focus on the existing big clusters. Otherwise, impairment to upland landscapes will become a serious and even more contentious matter.

10. Content of an uplands vision The first question here (4) asks about key choices for a future vision: may we answer more in terms of factors and limitations, and offer the following summary points?

- First, the limitations of soils, climate and terrain are such that, as a general principle, we should be looking at extensive land uses of low physical and aesthetic impact. We should aim in any land use policies for the uplands to contribute to the care and enhancement of these sensitive settings. The uplands cover a wide range of terrain, some with a bit more capacity for use than others, but the wilder and rougher areas should have strict protection. We need an approach that is less demanding on what poor soils, harsh upland climate and rough terrain can deliver.
- Many public policy decisions for in the uplands in the past have been driven by thinking about enhancement or exploitation of the land resource, which has, in the end, been overtaken by limits to productivity, along with other external and often economic factors.
- We have existing strategies for forestry and (shortly, we understand) for agriculture: perhaps this is a signal that levels of integration between sectors do need to be improved – this is, of course, a matter that extends beyond the uplands. We have yet to be convinced about how the Land-Use Strategy can deliver an integrated approach.

- In all these past ventures (see also below) the quality of the landscape (and thereby its enjoyment) has been close to the bottom of the pile of considerations, and this should change.
- Those parts of our uplands that are designated for their national or local scenic significance or which display qualities of wildness are not being properly safeguarded and this must change. It is the nature of our spacious upland landscapes that their safeguard should be extensive in its approach,

11. Question 5 asks about other issues and we have two points to make here. Thinking about land-use strategies should take account of what has happened in the recent past, and this is especially important for upland landscapes, given the extent of public policy intervention in the post-war period, with the outcome of much adverse change to our landscapes. At this time, the drive to hydro development led to significant changes to valued landscapes over extensive areas of upland Scotland from the construction of dams and their reservoirs, and related infra-structure. This led to significant public protest in the 1960's at a time when the scale of adverse change became apparent, and enterprise of this kind was eventually brought to a halt, in part also for economic reasons: but this same force for change has arisen over the past decade, with the scale of wind power development now being a serious landscape threat, as noted above. Afforestation through the 1950's till the 1980's has been another publicly funded means of significant adverse change to our landscapes, again with contention.

12. In the past, there was much investment to enhance hill farm grazings and the residue of that action for land improvement is still visible over Scotland on the lower slopes of hill grazings. But of recent, hill farming has been in decline, especially sheep farming and especially in the remoter areas, and much of this arises from changing economics this kind of land use. This decline has accelerated of recent because of changes to funding support and, in turn, this raises difficult questions about the future use of poor land in the uplands. In short, there is dynamic in land-use change in the uplands, none of which is easy to resolve and, without care, our upland landscapes may again be at the bottom of the pile in the search for solutions.

13. Development of the vision SNH has a problem in having to prepare some sort of bold vision statement by the end of the year for circumstances that are dynamic, uncertain and with fragmented sectoral interests. Our only suggestion on development of this theme is that an expert, who has the commitment and capacity to take a broad view across all the current and past changes be engaged to prepare a balanced cross-sectoral assessment for wide debate. In short, it may be that we are not in a position yet to create the desired forward-looking vision statement.

Yours sincerely



Alison M Riddell  
ScotWays

[alison\\_riddell@scotways.com](mailto:alison_riddell@scotways.com)