

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

### **A response from Trees for Life**

#### **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.

The uplands tend to be areas characterised by limited potential for high value economic use. This is generally a result of a combination of low accessibility and limited potential for vegetation growth. Land capability measures therefore look like a more accurate way of defining the essence of upland. There may also be a role for using landscape qualities to reflect some of the aesthetic aspects of what makes the uplands valuable, although we have some reservations about whether landscape character types have an unintended consequence to deflect potentially positive landscape changes.

#### **What benefits do the uplands provide to Scotland?**

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

These seem well documented now, but include:

- People's use of the uplands for a variety of recreational reasons, including the simple enjoyment and renewal from spending time in natural spaces.
- Economic benefits from businesses facilitating visitors and recreation, renewable energy, long-established economic uses like farming, forestry and field sports. An increase in small local businesses using upland woodland for raw materials would help make the land use mix in the uplands more diverse and sustainable – in social, economic and environmental terms.
- The environmental benefits from biodiversity and ecosystem services are becoming increasingly understood. Our view is that allowing natural processes to govern how the uplands develop is the most effective and sustainable way to realise these environmental benefits along with many of the social and economic benefits outlined above.

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

Land management which supports natural processes to increase the extent and improve the condition of woodland, montane scrub and peatland habitats in the uplands will sequester more carbon, inhibit flooding, increase ecosystem functionality and support richer wildlife communities. Diversifying land cover in this way will make the uplands more resilient in the face of climate change.

#### **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?

What are the relative values to society of the currently predominant land uses (farming, field sports, commercial forestry) and alternative uses with social and/or environmental benefits as their primary aims?

How can we best drive change towards a land use mix that maximises the benefits of land to society while maintaining the viability of upland businesses?

The debate about the uplands has long been stymied by the difficulty in resolving conflicts between land uses offering direct economic returns to individuals and those with the potential to benefit society overall. If a new strategic vision for the uplands is to mean anything in practice, these conflicts and choices need to be explicitly acknowledged. Doing so will require us to ask fundamental questions about the consequences of continuing with land management which precludes changes to a more sustainable, more widely beneficial land use balance.

This leads onto questions about how we can move towards this balance, so the strategic vision should also consider the use of incentive regimes, the possible use of financial disincentives and perhaps even legislation. Naturally, the changing context provided by land reform and the possible implications of Brexit need to be borne in mind throughout this process. Indeed, this thinking should be used to help shape the post-Brexit future of financial support for land management.

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

This issue seems pretty broad already!

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

No.

#### **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?

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

The list of usual suspects in land use issues is well known. However, there is a wider set of stakeholders who, while affected by land use, tend not to engage with the issues because they aren't directly involved in land management. Both local communities and non-local communities of interest are affected by the way upland land use forms the context for their social, economic and environmental activities, but can often assume that commenting on land use decisions and strategy isn't for them.

We support broadening the conversation to include more of the people affected indirectly by upland land use and who stand to benefit from strategically-guided change. This will involve the challenges of illustrating how land use decisions affect their lives, how today's landscapes have changed over time and could evolve in the future, the potential ways positive changes can be brought about and how such stakeholders can make contributions to the discussion. Visual media and the arts can provide effective ways of highlighting these connections and stimulating conversations about the pros and cons of possible changes. Interpreting the gaelic heritage of landscapes can help to illustrate the extent to which change has taken place over time. Schools can also offer a good way to engage a wider community. Participative approaches can then provide accessible channels for stakeholders to articulate their aspirations and ideas.

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

SNH's remit applies well to this exercise. Input from contractors with specialist skills in community engagement and dealing with conflicting land use interests, the John Hutton Institute for example, would also make a valuable contribution.

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

The vision should be readily accessible by people without a background in land use. A range of formats will probably be necessary to achieve this while retaining enough detail to be competent, but we would welcome imaginative use of visual media to illustrate what the envisioned uplands might look like at different stages of the future.

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