

Uplands under pressure

The Sustainable Uplands project is bringing together people and ideas in a bid to make these unique, vulnerable and isolated areas more resilient to change. Anne Liddon reports

Rural communities are adapting to pressures all the time – social, economic and environmental. Disease outbreaks such as foot and mouth, the ‘right to roam’ legislation and changes driven by national, European and international policy have all had their effect.

Within the rural economy, marginal landscapes such as the uplands are particularly vulnerable, and the people who live and work in them can find themselves isolated and unheard. Uplands are Britain’s biggest carbon store and highly valued for their unique ecology, water provision and flocks of grouse and sheep. However, atmospheric pollution, grazing and burning regimes and cultural, demographic and climate changes have been blamed for putting pressure on these fragile environments.

As part of the Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU) programme, which conducts research into issues affecting the rural economy, a team from Leeds, Durham, Sheffield and Sussex universities is working closely with partner organisations Moors for the Future and the Heather Trust on the Sustainable Uplands project. Their purpose is to help people in the Peak District, the Yorkshire Dales and Galloway, Scotland, to better anticipate, monitor and respond to future challenges like climate change and new agricultural subsidies.

One very important finding of the project relates to the role that peat deposits play in storing carbon dioxide. Vast systems of drainage ditches were dug during the 1950s, in an unsuccessful attempt to increase the productivity of the land. The effect of this is that peat deposits in England and Wales, which



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could store up to 41,000 tonnes of carbon per year if they were in pristine condition, are actually releasing carbon into the atmosphere at a rate of 381,000 tonnes annually because of erosion and damage. So if we could block the drains and restore the peats to a pristine state, the amount of carbon they store could be very significant – equivalent to the emissions of 2% of car traffic in England and Wales per year. The immediate problem is how to fund such an extensive programme of restoration. If the drains could be blocked, peat would begin to reform, but Defra suggests that the cost of blocking just one hectare of peat drains is at least £188.

So, the team has come up with the idea of working with a carbon-offsetting company that would allow consumers to offset their carbon footprint by paying for upland regeneration. They are

currently investigating the possibilities for this, in partnership with Moors for the Future.

Gathering intelligence

Knowledge about the uplands exists not just in the traditional academic disciplines, such as soil science, hydrology, anthropology and economics, but with conservationists, water companies, farmers and grouse moor managers who have accumulated it through experimentation, innovation and experience, often over generations. What is often lacking is useful interaction between these different groups of people.

Sometimes interests conflict. A preliminary scoping study for the project produced an assortment of visions for a sustainable future from visitors and people living and working in the Peak District National Park, ranging from re-wilding (or land

abandonment) and ‘silvopastoralism’ (sheep farming with widely-spaced trees), to maintaining the landscape as it is, dominated by grouse moor management and sheep farming. Conservationists favoured tightening the Heather and Grass Burning Code, due to fears that inappropriate burning was degrading ecosystems, while gamekeepers and farmers who use burning as a land-management tool were concerned about this.

So, involving people with such diverse interests does itself pose challenges, but the response has been overwhelmingly positive and land managers and others who work in the uplands have welcomed the opportunity to comment. Statutory bodies are also supportive and Defra has used the work produced in the scoping phase as a case study for their review of the Health and Grass Burning Code.

The team has analysed relationships among Peak District stakeholders to ensure that they include all interested parties in discussions, including groups who use the uplands for recreation and are not generally consulted about how the land is managed. At the moment, a key priority for the project is to understand the reasons behind the decisions and actions of land managers and to better predict how they might respond to future change. They already know from the peat problem that ideas about the best use of the uplands have varied widely in the past.



For more information about the project and to find out how land managers and others can contribute, visit www.relu.ac.uk and www.env.leeds.ac.uk/sustainableuplands