



# the National Trust for Scotland

a place for everyone

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## **HILLS AND ISLANDS INQUIRY**

The National Trust for Scotland (Trust) welcomes this initiative by the Royal Society of Edinburgh to look at Scotland's Hills and Islands and this opportunity to contribute to the debate.

### **Summary and Vision**

Scotland's hill and island areas are widely valued for their immense international and national significance for landscape, recreation, cultural heritage, biodiversity and wild land. These attributes contribute immeasurably to the quality of life and well-being both of people who live in these areas and of those who visit them. The Trust's vision is for all of these values to be equally recognised, celebrated and protected and properly resourced, in addition to the principal economic activities of tourism, agriculture and forestry.

### **The Trust's Role in Scotland's Hills and Islands**

This Inquiry into Scotland's hills and Islands is of great relevance to the Trust, which is both a champion of Scotland's cultural and natural heritage and landscapes, and one of Scotland's largest landowners, with 76,000 hectares in its care, including eight major upland estates and a number of islands as well as island properties. As a result of managing these various properties, the Trust has experience of a wide range of issues that affect upland and island areas of Scotland. Its viewpoint is shaped both by its commitment to the conservation of some of Scotland's most outstanding natural and cultural heritage and by its being a significant direct provider of employment as well as a key player in the tourism industry in these areas. Many of its properties are held in perpetuity for the Nation. The comments that follow are therefore informed by the experience gained through our long involvement in upland and island areas in Scotland.

### **Principal Observations**

The main points we would wish to make are that:

- Scotland's uplands and islands are of immense significance for their natural and cultural heritage and landscapes. Their conservation is vital to the sense of place and well-being of the communities who live there and also to many rural economies;

- Scotland's uplands and islands are very important to many who do not live in these places but who are aware of them and like to visit, providing amongst other things a source of challenge, escape, spiritual refreshment and enjoyment;
- The communities that live in these areas are central to their future;
- Tourism is a key economic driver, much of it based on the outstanding heritage, scenery and landscape of these places and on access to them;
- A number of issues threaten these areas, such as climate change, the unpredictability of tourism, lack of affordable housing and changes in subsidies;
- The Inquiry needs to be clear about why its remit focusses specifically on hill and island areas, as many of the issues discussed below apply equally well to the whole of rural Scotland.

1. **What would you perceive to be the main drivers of change and sources of income generation in upland and island areas of Scotland?**

**Tourism**

For most of Scotland's islands and hill areas, tourism is a key economic driver and mainstay of the local economy. Significant numbers of people are employed in the tourism-related sector, whether directly at tourist attractions or more indirectly as accommodation or service providers. Visitors' use of local services also helps retain local services and infrastructure which in turn benefits local communities. However tourism is an unpredictable market and can be affected by a number of external forces such as terrorist threats, the strength of the pound, cheap international flights, increased competition or unpredictable events such as an outbreak of foot and mouth disease. We saw what a major impact the latter had on Scotland's rural areas in 2001, and although in the present scare the countryside is to remain open (at the time of writing), there are restrictions on the movement of livestock and a suspension of slaughtering which has serious implications for many rural businesses. Tourism therefore is a key income generator for upland and island areas of Scotland, but it also is susceptible to change. In some rural communities this perceived over-reliance on tourism at the expense of more traditional employment such as farming, forestry and fishing is a cause for concern, in others it is an acknowledged fact.

**Technology**

Advances in technology, such as e-mail, the internet and broadband, now give people much greater flexibility in where they live and carry out their business. Technology has therefore been a driver of change and is likely to continue to be so, enabling new industries and individuals to set up businesses where once they might have been inconceivable. However, many of these businesses are likely to be relatively small-scale and therefore unlikely to generate significant numbers of jobs in rural areas. Also, some of these new businesses will be existing ones transferred from urban to rural areas and those involved may well be older, more articulate and demanding, resulting in impacts on demography and on the demand for public services.

**Housing**

One of the most serious issues in the uplands and islands of Scotland, and a real threat to the stability of many already fragile rural communities, is a lack of affordable housing. With available land for housing becoming increasingly scarce, the holiday home market booming and ever-increasing house prices, affordable housing has become a major problem both for rural and urban populations, where particularly the young are being priced out of the housing market. This has major implications for the demographics and stability of these communities and is a serious driver of change.

The Trust, as a landlord in a number of areas affected by this issue, comes under considerable pressure to release land for housing. We have tried to accommodate this where we have felt it possible, for instance at Plockton on the Balmacara Estate in Ross-shire. The Cairngorms National Park is another example of where great efforts are being made to tackle the problem; the Park Authority is proposing that 50% of all new housing developments within the Park must be affordable housing. Robust strategies must be implemented in the areas covered by this Inquiry if this problem is to be addressed. Available and affordable housing is a significant driver of change.

New housing has the potential to tackle other issues such as rural fuel poverty, if well-designed and energy-efficient. However, other considerations must also be taken into account in the location and design of new housing, such as impacts on the landscape and on other heritage values and implications for flood management. In particular public policy needs to guard against the increasing urbanisation of the countryside, which is occurring where urban standards are rigorously applied even where not necessarily appropriate.

### **Crofting**

The Scottish Executive is at present looking into crofting through its Crofting Inquiry. The implementation of the findings of this Inquiry could have major implications for the crofting counties. The Trust's response to the Inquiry is enclosed and can also be seen on its website<sup>1</sup>.

### **Renewable Energy**

Renewable energy is likely to be an increasing driver of change in the uplands and islands of Scotland for the foreseeable future. If the UK is to achieve its targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, there will have to be a move away from the present over-reliance on fossil fuel-based energy generation, with a greater amount of energy coming from renewable sources. This presents both great opportunities and threats to Scotland's uplands and islands.

For the communities in these areas, renewable energy developments may present opportunities to capitalise on their locations, to make their communities more environmentally and financially sustainable and independent through becoming net exporters of energy. Islands such as Fair Isle (owned by the Trust) and Gigha have led the way in showing how renewable energy at an appropriate and locally-managed scale can be an important revenue generator for Scotland's islands and uplands.

However, renewable energy developments and the infrastructure that goes with them, such as new power lines and substations also pose a threat to local communities, Scotland's heritage and its world class landscapes. To mitigate these impacts and to ensure the benefits are maximised, renewable energy developments must be well designed and sensitively sited. We would advocate small-scale local schemes that supply local communities rather than big industrial-scale schemes that require significant additional infrastructure. To this end, we believe that all new renewable developments must be guided by a national locational strategy, which has been thought through, consulted upon and planned for properly and which will guide new developments to the most suitable sites, whilst safeguarding Scotland's heritage, landscapes and communities. The Trust has called upon the Scottish Executive to take the lead in this.

### **Socio-economic Change**

Decreasing economic assistance, including through changes in EU funding such as agricultural subsidies or the social and development funds, will have an impact on specific sectors such as the farming community, but also more widely on rural communities, through less funding going into infrastructural and development projects. At the same time, the cost of living is going up with increases in energy prices, transport costs and interest rates. This disproportionately affects the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nts.org.uk/Conserve/policy\\_work.php](http://www.nts.org.uk/Conserve/policy_work.php)

communities in the uplands and islands of Scotland and can be a major disincentive to anyone wishing to stay in these places, move to them or to establishing new businesses.

There appears to be a tension between two apparently opposing forces regarding the economics of food production and distribution. One of these is the increasing centralisation of food marketing and distribution through the power of the big supermarkets; the other is the development of local food networks which seek to re-establish links between farmers and growers with local customers, with potential benefits in terms of food miles, freshness of produce and quality assurance.

The general decrease in the size of the agricultural workforce over recent years, as a result of increasing mechanisation and the search for economies of scale, has in many areas led to an ageing population of the remaining agricultural workers and concerns about an imminent loss of traditional rural skills.

## **2. What are the attributes of social, cultural and economic value in Scotland's hills and island areas?**

### **Cultural Heritage**

Scotland's islands have an historic environment of immense richness and diversity as these were the places that saw the foundation of human colonisation and culture from some of the earliest people to recent times. There is abundant evidence of this, much of it of national and international importance, as indicated for example by two of Scotland's two World Heritage Sites, St Kilda and Orkney inscribed for their cultural value. There are also thousands of Scheduled Ancient Monuments found on islands all around the Scottish coast from Arran in the south to Iona, Canna and Mingulay to the west and Shetland in the north. These islands hold an invaluable and irreplaceable resource of great educational and historic value which enable us to investigate and gain a greater understanding of our past. They are often central to our sense of place and identity, and are of great value to the tourism industry.

The cultural heritage found in the hills and glens on the mainland is also of great significance. Where today these areas might appear deserted and uninhabitable, they once were alive, and evidence for this can still be found. The Trust recently demonstrated this at and around its property of Ben Lawers in Perthshire, where in collaboration with Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division and other partners, the Ben Lawers Historic Landscape Project was undertaken. This multi-disciplinary project involved archaeologists, historians, scientists and members of the public all working together in an attempt to understand the last thousand years of history of this particular Highland landscape and its people. Full details can be seen on the Project's website<sup>2</sup>.

There remains a strong living culture, including language, music and heritage in many of these places, including those with Gaelic traditions or Norse roots. Local crafts are of major importance in many parts of the hills and islands.

### **Natural Heritage**

Scotland's hills and islands contain many unique habitats and species that are found nowhere else in the UK. At a time when the overwhelming majority of the British landmass is significantly altered by human activity, the high mountains and islands contain some of the least impacted habitats, most nearly approximating to pristine, natural conditions.

The tops of the mountains are home to a large number of Arctic-Alpine species; almost all of the UK's land over 1000m is to be found in Scotland. This includes distinctive birds, such as the snow

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.benlawers.org.uk/>

bunting, dotterel and ptarmigan, but also high-altitude plants, both flowering and non-vascular. These high-altitude communities are severely at risk from climate change because, unlike species from lower altitudes which can move upwards to escape rising temperatures, they have nowhere else to go. Furthermore, land at high altitudes is discontinuous, effectively forming islands separated from each other. This minimises the possibility of species moving from one massif to another.

At lower altitudes, a number of plant communities, though common in Scotland, are relatively rare on a global scale. Heather moorland and blanket bog have their centre of world distribution in Scotland and Ireland. Familiar species such as ling and bog asphodel are rarely found in other countries so we have an international responsibility to look after them.

A recent study of Important Plant Areas in the UK<sup>3</sup> identified that 42 out of 150 are to be found in Scotland's hills and coastal districts. This is out of proportion to the land area and indicates the botanical richness and distinctiveness of these areas. The site that shows the highest rating of plant diversity and distinctiveness in the UK is Ben Lawers and the Breadalbane Hills.

Scotland is particularly rich in lower plants. The moist conditions on the west coast favour the growth of mosses and liverworts and Scotland is the centre of distribution of these groups in Europe. It is also unusually rich in lichens. Many of these are associated with rock surfaces in the mountains but there are also a large number of species characteristic of tree bark and heath communities. Ben Lawers has some 18 species of lichen found nowhere else in the UK, making it the country's richest site. Fungi are also outstandingly rich and abundant in Scotland. The two richest sites in the UK are in Speyside and Deeside where they are associated with native pinewoods.

Scotland's coasts and islands are another centre of biological diversity. Top of the list come the seabirds, for which Scotland is outstandingly important, having some 40% of all of the seabirds breeding in the European Union. The reason for this richness lies in the proximity of very productive marine communities and the availability of numerous protected breeding sites on cliffs and islands. The near-shore marine communities are also outstandingly rich and diverse, ranging from sheltered sea lochs to coasts subject to extreme exposure from waves and tides. The diversity of marine habitats and species is to be found nowhere else in Europe. The sea lochs constitute a fjordic landscape which is extremely rare on a global scale, being found in very few countries elsewhere (only Canada, Alaska, Chile, Norway, New Zealand and Greenland).

### **Landscape**

Scotland's natural and cultural landscapes, particularly those in the uplands, coastal areas and islands of Scotland are renowned throughout the world. They have a value far beyond their mere scenic qualities. They enhance people's quality of life and well-being; they give inspiration, refreshment and enjoyment. They contain the record of Scotland's past and are central to our national, regional and local identity. They are one of the main reasons people visit Scotland and are therefore key to Scotland's tourism industry; they provide attractive settings which encourage inward investment. Scotland's landscapes, particularly those of the areas being looked at by this Inquiry, are therefore of fundamental importance to Scotland's environment, society and economy.

One particular facet of Scotland's landscapes and one that is particularly associated with upland and remote areas of Scotland is its areas of wild land. These are generally inaccessible places apparently unaffected by contemporary human activity, where people can escape from the pressures of their everyday lives. They are highly valued by the communities that live near by, by tourists who come in search both for their unspoilt beauty and for the physical challenges that they present as well as by many who have never visited them but value their existence. There are

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/plantlife-saving-species-plant-areas.html>

not many areas in the UK nor further afield in Europe where such unspoilt wild land still exists, placing greater value on those areas of Scotland where it does. The Trust's Wild Land Policy<sup>4</sup> guides internal management of Trust properties with wild land value and is also used to advocate and promote wild land more widely. The work the Trust has and continues to carry out on footpath repairs in the uplands and on track removal at Mar Lodge Estate are good examples of the value the Trust places on wild land and landscape qualities and of its work to preserve these aspects.

The importance of landscape has been rising up the political agenda in recent years, both here and abroad. In 2000 the European Landscape Convention was opened for signature at a Ministerial Conference of the Council of Europe in Florence. Subsequent to this 27 EU countries have ratified this convention, including the UK government. In Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has established the Scottish Landscape Forum with the support of the Scottish Executive to implement the ELC and also to take forward the work SNH had been doing on landscape in recent years. The Trust's Landscape Policy<sup>5</sup> highlights the importance of landscape to our sense of well being and quality of life and sets out the Trust's commitment to promoting the conservation, enjoyment and stewardship of Scotland's valuable landscapes.

### **Access and Recreation**

Scotland's hills and islands are of national and international importance as a recreational resource. Many thousands of visitors are attracted for the recreational opportunities these areas offer, both in active and passive pursuits. The largest group (according to the Trust's experience and the HIE Visitor Survey) are walkers, but many thousands more come to take part in other activities such as climbing, sailing, kayaking, mountain biking, shooting and fishing, and others come simply to enjoy the scenery and wildlife. Much of this recreation is informal and non-commercial, attracted by and based on Scotland's open countryside, its scenery and landscapes, its wildlife and cultural heritage and accessibility. The recreational opportunities these areas of Scotland provide are often the mainstays for many rural economies with businesses directly and indirectly attracting and catering for these visitors. Nature-based tourism is finding a growing market in Scotland, one of the prime examples of which is on Mull. A number of small businesses have been established to take visitors on organised trips to see some of the best wildlife in Scotland. In addition, the islands attract many who won't go on an organised trip but have been drawn to the islands because of their wildlife and scenery.

The recent Land Reform Act and Scottish Outdoor Access Code have provided better clarity of access arrangements and encouraging more confident participation in outdoor pursuits in Scotland, not least through the promotion of a core path network. The Trust is strongly supportive of this and has called on the Scottish Government to ensure that the core path network and access officers, who help facilitate access, are adequately funded to ensure the full benefits of our new access legislation are reaped. The Trust has always maintained open access to its countryside properties, and through projects such as its Scotland's Mountain Heritage footpath project<sup>6</sup>, supported by its 'Sole Trading' appeal, will continue to encourage access whilst ensuring conservation of its properties' natural and cultural heritage and landscape.

Increasingly links are also being seen between greater access to the countryside and informal outdoor recreation with the wider social and sustainability agendas, including improved health and social justice.

### **Communities**

It is important to be explicit about why national support for retaining populations in hill and

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nts.org.uk/conservation/downloads/wild\\_land\\_policy\\_2002.pdf](http://www.nts.org.uk/conservation/downloads/wild_land_policy_2002.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nts.org.uk/conservation/downloads/LandscapePolicy2005.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ntseducation.org.uk/students/search-footpaths.html>

islands can be justified. From the Trust's point of view, this is because the maintenance of many of the various significant aspects of these areas identified above partly depends upon maintaining a thriving population. There is an ever-growing need to support the traditional way of life in these areas. With threats to the stability of rural communities from issues such as affordable housing or the increasing cost of living, rural communities are in need of support. They need support to enable them to identify new opportunities and then support to implement these changes. Tourism is central to many local economies, but it relies in strong part on the people living in these areas. Tourists are drawn to areas because of the heritage and scenery, and also the values emanating from the social, cultural and indigenous background of the people living there, so if these facets are lost this will have a major impact on the economic value of these places.

The Trust has recently established an Economic Development and Communities Advisory Panel, in order to ensure that expert advice is available on how it can best serve and support local communities, particularly those based on and around its properties.

**3. How will changes in agriculture, forestry and tourism affect the economies of these areas and what scope is there for alternative sources of income and employment?**

As discussed above, tourism is one of the main economic drivers in these areas and any adverse changes to it would have severe repercussions for many local communities and businesses. This would in addition have adverse implications for many local economies and the national economy, thus the impacts would be felt much more widely.

Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, modulation and moves towards agricultural payments linked to environmental benefits will have implications for the economies of many upland and island areas of Scotland, as well as for the biodiversity in these areas. Areas where crofting has been the traditional land use are likely to benefit from any changes, as the traditional methods employed in crofting are amongst the most environmentally friendly of all managed rural landscapes. As we stated in our recent submission to the Crofting Inquiry, 'The increasing emphasis on farmers and crofters being custodians of valuable landscapes as well as producers of agricultural products, must surely result in greater financial rewards for the types of diversified rural activity once thought of as outdated and on the fringe of economic growth.' The high quality landscape and environment of the crofting areas are important for local people's quality of life and sense of well-being, and are also a vital economic asset for the local economy through the tourism they attract. The link with the land is of prime importance in these crofting areas and should be retained and supported in the future.

Changes to agricultural payments that are more closely linked to environmental benefits will also benefit the natural heritage and landscapes in these areas. This in turn will help to boost the ecotourism industry which is growing in many rural and island areas.

**4. What are the impacts of changes to land use and ownership on the landscape, environment and communities of these areas?**

Although most of rural Scotland is still owned by individuals, there has been a gradual shift towards ownership by local community trusts and by non-governmental organisations, at least partly encouraged by the provisions of the Land Reform Act. In general this has resulted in a broadening of management objectives from a primary focus on shooting, fishing, forestry and agriculture towards conservation, access, recreation and community benefit. Further changes to rural landscapes are likely as public support increasingly encourages the management of the countryside for environmental objectives, including carbon storage and flood management.

**5. What are the implications of climate change on agriculture/communities in**

## **Scotland's hill and island areas?**

Climate change is one of the greatest threats to our heritage, communities, landscapes and economies. It is a global threat, but felt at a very local level, most recently demonstrated in the extreme flooding in England, but by no means restricted to these areas or to flooding. Amongst the effects of climate change, experts predict sea level increase, rising temperatures and more extreme weather episodes – all with the potential to affect Scotland's uplands and islands.

One aspect that is particularly susceptible to climate change is the marine ecosystem. While substantial shifts in temperature or range are still largely predicted on land, they have already been observed in the sea. Typical plankton communities have already shifted northwards by some 900 km, and changes in the food supply of seabirds, in particular the replacement of sandeels by snake pipefish, have been having an enormous impact on their breeding success. Because many coastal human communities depend on the sea for their livelihood, through tourism, recreational angling or commercial fishing (in that order of economic importance) it is likely that climate change in the sea will have knock-on impacts on the rural economy.

Climate change must be tackled in a balanced and sustainable way so that the solutions to one problem do not become the cause of damage to other aspects of Scotland's cultural and natural heritage or to people's livelihoods and well-being. Climate change also presents opportunities for communities living in Scotland's hills and islands, for instance in locally-managed renewable energy development and generation.

The impact of climate change on soils is uncertain; some may become more fertile, some less so, and there may be more erosion. It is likely to become increasingly important to protect the carbon stored in Scotland's soils, possibly resulting in a partial shift towards managing soils for carbon storage or for biomass rather than for food production.

### **7. What are the regional variations in opportunities and disadvantage and how can these be accounted for in policies and support structures at the Scottish level?**

There are large regional variations in opportunities and disadvantages. For example, the area around Inverness is thriving, as are many areas in the Cairngorms National Park and the population of Skye continues to grow. It will be important to ensure that the rapid economic growth of areas such of these is sustainable in overall environmental terms, for example the upgrading of transport and power links has inevitable consequences for the landscape and environment. However there are still areas where depopulation is continuing, such as Harris or North-West Sutherland. Much of this results from the lack of employment opportunities, lack of affordable housing and increased cost of living.

I hope that these comments will help the Inquiry to formulate its recommendations. We would be keen to meet members of the Inquiry Committee to discuss the issues set out above if this would be helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you feel that the Trust might be able to offer any further assistance or information.

Yours sincerely

  
John Mayhew

John Mayhew  
Head of Policy and Planning

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# the National Trust for Scotland

a place for everyone

**The conservation charity which protects and promotes Scotland's natural and cultural heritage for present and future generations to enjoy**

We are Scotland's largest voluntary conservation charity; we believe that the natural and cultural heritage of Scotland is one of our nation's greatest assets and that we have a duty to pass on this inheritance to benefit future generations. We aim to achieve this in three ways:

- by directly owning or managing some of Scotland's most important heritage places
- by engaging with all sections of society to make our heritage more socially inclusive
- by campaigning on behalf of the whole of Scotland's heritage

We are supported in this by our 297,000 members and a team of 2,500 dedicated volunteers. Our 129 properties include 76,000 hectares of Scotland's finest countryside and wild landscapes as well as castles, country houses and gardens. Each year we welcome around 3 million visitors to these very special places, and well over 100,000 young people benefit from specially arranged educational visits.