

## **The Royal Society of Edinburgh**

### **SCRR Peter Wilson Lecture**

#### ***Scotland's Land: Successes and Failures, Challenges and Solutions***

#### **Professor Roger Crofts CBE FRSE**

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Report by Jeremy Watson

“Oh dear, what’s been done to our land,” declared Roger Crofts at the beginning of his lecture, highlighting some of the mistakes in the use of Scotland’s land. “What has gone wrong; what needs to be put right; and how?” Given Professor Crofts’ background in the Scottish Office, as Chief Executive of Scottish Natural Heritage and now Chairman of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, the audience knew they were in for a colourful, informed and challenging account.

Examples of what has gone wrong historically are still with us, Professor Crofts said. For instance, the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century tax breaks that encouraged landowners to plant alien Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine across the Flow Country; the 18<sup>th</sup>-Century stripping of carbon-hoarding peat from lowland bogs such as the Carse of Stirling; experimental planting of non-native tree species around Loch Ossian; and the unfettered explosion in numbers of the herbivore red deer. Even now, farmers are ignoring the well-recorded and scientifically-proven benefits for wildlife and pest control by removing buffer strips around their fields. Hedgerows continue to be ripped up, and soil erosion is a problem under certain types of cultivation.

The “crass inequality” of EU agricultural support is not helping, with too little money going to those stewards of the land who benefit society. Meanwhile, there is no national statutory protection for farmland against home builders, and the hard surfacing of urban areas continues apace. Professor Crofts said he is no “bearded, open-toed sandal wearer”, but he is in favour of helping natural diversity to thrive. He made it clear from examples that Scotland can be justifiably called the ‘most naturally diverse small country in the world’ and that we should work with this rather than imposing single all-Scotland solutions.

He raised five challenges which the public needs to consider. First, what natural world do we actually want to live in, when human beings have had so much influence over the centuries? Take “re-wilding” for example. How far should this go? There are some impressive, man-created landscapes that we would want to keep. No-one wanted the large hydro-electric plants in the Highlands that were built after World War Two, but we would not be without them now. The osprey has been reintroduced to widespread acclaim, but bringing back red kites has not met with universal approval. Beavers have also been officially reintroduced, yet populations already living in the wild – due to releases by well-meaning supporters – have been condemned. A formal review of whether lynx could be re-introduced is needed, using the international protocols, so that informed decisions rather than snap judgements can be made. We have turned the clock back on afforestation in the Flow Country, thanks to great work by the RSPB,

but we can't reverse history everywhere. What we need is to develop new models to test what we can do in the future, but with the past in mind.

Second, is the problem of conflicts between different land uses, especially on the moorlands: sheep, deer, forestry, renewable energy, nature and sport. But, the two government working parties recently established are separate. So, what are the challenges that lie ahead? Grants are available for trees, with the aim of reforesting large tracts of Scotland. But is more forestry the right way to go? Is it the right kind of forestry? Areas such as the Kintyre peninsula are already covered in industrial-scale plantations. Do we want to add industrial-scale wind farms into that mix? The challenge here is proper planning of competing development, but silo thinking is very entrenched at government level.

Third, is whether who owns the land is important. But community land ownership is growing, so we have to decide who does it best. Are foreign owners all bad? A succession of Danish landowners, for instance, have transformed the Glenfeshie Estate, restoring its natural diversity as well as bringing old buildings back into use and creating jobs. NGOs and charities own significant properties, but they don't always get it right. The Assynt Estate is in community ownership, but is struggling to control deer numbers. The reality, Professor Crofts said, is that it is not who owns the land that is important, but what they do with it. Building the capacity of owners to care for their land is a critical issue.

Dealing with climate change is a fourth challenge. Woodland and grassland are the best types of land to store carbon, but we need the right trees in the right places at the right time. If a wood that has been there 40 years is chopped down, the carbon release is huge and underlying soils are eroded and nutrients lost. Connecting protected areas through networks and corridors is essential; let's get action, not more talk, on this.

Brexit also provides a challenge. There are clear dangers to losing EU environmental protection and environmental quality controls, Professor Crofts said, and governments have to make sure they are translated into UK and Scots law. The threat of being taken to the European Court of Justice is a "scary" prospect for civil servants and is successful in acting as both a spur and a deterrent. Although, as a result of Brexit, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is dead, the challenge is now to put something better in its place.

One other key challenge is simply to decide what our land is for. Some has to be for the production of food, but much of it is cherished simply for its landscape value and for providing public access and enjoyment. What we need to do is get right the system of rewards for landowners who provide these things.

The Professor highlighted three types of solution: maps, mechanisms and mentalities. Using all of the available spatial information about the land and its use at regional level will help to reduce conflict and provide solutions for the future. Our best agricultural land must be better protected by radically changing Scottish planning policy to achieve this. Likewise, our best scenery and environmentally-important areas must be safeguarded with a creative 21<sup>st</sup>-Century approach. We talk about protecting our nationally-important landscapes, but then allow people to build golf courses on them. Wind farm developers must be told there are areas where they can build and areas where they are not allowed to go. Wildlife corridors should be identified and encouraged, to help the natural world react to climate change. Regional land use partnerships should be

developed all around Scotland, similar to that proposed by the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Partnership.

So what mechanisms do we need to make this happen, Professor Crofts asked? The most critical is to expect all owners, tenants and managers of land to be good stewards.

Implementing the new Rights and Responsibilities Principles is critical, ensuring that public money should only be given for producing public goods.

But understanding of the land should start – and be taught – at a much earlier age. “Land literacy” should be in the school geography curriculum, so that children understand what the land is for. One idea worth pursuing is the twinning of schools in urban and rural areas, so that each can learn from the other. At a political level, engagement is the key; with governments, quangos and the big environmental charities – often unwilling to cede control – sharing power with local people.

Underpinning it all should be good science. We need properly-funded science to find out what really works, said Professor Crofts, with the network of demonstration and research sites putting ideas into practice.

In conclusion, Professor Crofts said that solutions are of no use in isolation. What is crucial to success is a common desire to work together and reach consensus on what is right for the land on which we live. Although he has lived in Scotland – a great place to live and work – since 1966, he still detects “not our problem” and “blame someone else” mentality. The use of behavioural sciences, rather than just traditional legal and economic approaches, will help. Overcoming the challenges and applying solutions that will stand the test of time requires a change in mindset that encourages a truly consensual approach.

## **Q & A**

**Q:** There was no mention in your lecture of the historical dimension when talking about land value. There are many areas which contain fragile archaeological remains, yet they may be covered by new planting. Should this not be taken into account?

**A:** Yes, we do need to map these areas and safeguard them and we need to add that dimension to our planning procedures now. However, we need the archaeological lobby to fight for that.

**Q:** I agree that prime agricultural land should be safeguarded. How can we do this?

**A:** For planners to be instructed by government to safeguard prime quality agricultural land, and to focus housebuilding on waste and derelict land, and the restructuring of outmoded housing areas.

**Q:** CAP and the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) have been the bête noire of the conservation movement. However, they have provided some protections. How do we make sure that we get a better system after Brexit and make sure it rises up the political agenda?

**A:** If Brexit brings the demise of CAP, then a big tick. However, while some UK politicians are thinking about what will replace it and the long-term benefits, some in Scotland are more interested in how it will further their political careers. The First Minister appears to be forward looking, but this is not cascading down to some of her ministers. We need to make more of a fuss about this.

**Q:** Are there good examples of countries which have done this better than us?

**A:** Norway has a different approach. The social policy there is to make sure people stay on the land and it gives subsidies to achieve that. We have always been constrained in doing this by the Treasury. Post-Brexit, that may change. We want our farmers to stay on the hills, as it is vital for the countryside and the rural communities, as well as for those who visit.

The Vote of Thanks was offered by Professor Stuart Monro FRSE.