

Scotland's Rural College

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Warren, Charles; Glass, Jayne

*Published in:*  
The Geographer

Print publication: 01/10/2020

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Warren, C., & Glass, J. (2020). What future for Scotland's uplands? *The Geographer, Autumn*, 6-7.  
<https://www.rsgs.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c00183e3-34bc-4bbf-850f-8c2748627ee0>

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# What future for Scotland's uplands?

Dr Charles Warren, Senior Lecturer, School of Geography and Sustainable Development, University of St Andrews;

Dr Jayne Glass, Research Fellow, Rural Policy Centre, Scotland's Rural College

**The Scottish uplands are widely seen as an iconic and valued national asset, yet they are also the focus of long-running and acrimonious tussles over how they should best be managed.** A 2015 issue of *The Geographer* explored many of these contentious issues, including land ownership, renewable energy, wild land, climate change, and the respective places of farming, forestry, and game sport. These all remain live debates. However, the world has moved on, bringing new perspectives and realities to bear on these long-standing discussions. This article provides a snapshot of this rapidly evolving picture, highlighting some of the salient issues and questions.

The challenges affecting the uplands operate at a wide range of scales, of both time and space. At the largest scale, addressing climate change remains the great, overarching imperative, its urgency recognised by the Scottish Government's declaration of a climate emergency in April 2019. But since 2015, Brexit has emerged to dominate the policy horizon, and, from early 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has profoundly rewritten the rules of everyday life, as well as tragically curtailing many lives. In these ways alone, the big picture now looks very different, and the contours of the 'new normal' remain extremely hazy. At smaller scales, too, recent years have seen several highly significant developments that are particular to the Scottish context. The Scottish Government (SG) has been focusing on the uplands as never before, commissioning high-profile inquiries into grouse moor management (the Werritty Report, 2019) and deer management (the Deer Working Group Report, 2020), and establishing the Scottish Land Commission (SLC) in 2017. Also in 2017, the SG's Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement, a world first, set out principles for balancing private and public interests. The steadily growing trend towards partnerships and collaborative working is being strongly encouraged through the SG's commitment to develop Regional Land Use Partnerships.

In all these ways, even before the pandemic struck, a ferment of fresh analysis and proposals was swirling around the uplands, questioning established assumptions, priorities, and practices. Now, to an extent, all bets are off, and arguably the most pressing question is how to 'build back better', ensuring that the recovery from Covid-19 is as green and future-proofed as possible. Brexit also offers a unique opportunity for fresh thinking. In this unparalleled context, it is hard to argue with the sentiments of Hamish Trench, the Chief Executive of the SLC, that this is a "time to be bold in reforming the way we make decisions about land use change."

Why do the uplands deserve a particular focus within this wider picture? Not only do they comprise almost half of Scotland, but they provide a wide range of important ecosystem services. The hills provide recreation opportunities and drinking water, as well as wind and water power for renewable energy; moorlands contribute to water regulation and support rich biodiversity; woodlands provide raw materials and carbon storage; and all these habitats provide carbon sequestration, notably the peatlands. Moreover, the uplands are the setting for important socio-economic

pursuits with wider public benefits such as agriculture, forestry, game sports, recreation and tourism. Finally, of course, for many rural communities the uplands are home.

What, then, might a bold, fresh approach to decision making look like in this important, multifaceted setting? Although everyone's crystal balls are unusually clouded right now, some future trends are discernible. One is that the long-championed ideals of joined-up thinking and integrated environmental

management will finally make the leap to working practices, not least because of the SG's strong push in this direction. Another is that tackling climate change will swiftly become established as a central, organising principle, as befits a

climate emergency. Despite decades of discussion and calls for radical change, 'business as usual' prevails, with only minor, peripheral adjustment. The supertanker has sailed on regardless. But the Covid-19 crisis may finally enable a new course to be charted.

Nevertheless, despite such positive potential, it is a safe bet that deep tensions will persist over the 'right' way forward. Virtually all upland

landscapes are managed for a range of purposes: they are multifunctional, cultural landscapes managed by diverse owners (private, public, NGO, community) who often have different core aims. The increasingly strong consensus about the climate change imperative does not magically translate into consensus on the ground. For example, the deeply acrimonious raptor debate, between grouse shooting and raptor conservation, has rumbled on for 30 years despite extensive efforts to find a resolution, and it will not evaporate overnight. Nor will controversies surrounding the impacts of large and expanding deer populations. The persistence of such debates is not just due to entrenched vested interests but often because both facts and values are in dispute. Not infrequently, 'the science' does not provide an unequivocal steer. Tensions can build when neighbouring landowners with different values pursue conflicting visions – rewilding versus re-peopling, for example: should the uplands be places

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Lapwing, Glen Quaich. © Colin Woolf

where natural processes are given free rein or places which restore human communities by supporting livelihoods? Can it be both/and, or is it either/or?

In an arena as diverse as the Scottish uplands, it is easy to acknowledge that one size does not fit all, but it is far harder to agree on what *does* fit in any particular place, and why one positive vision should be chosen over another. How should the multiple competing demands be met, especially when so many of them are targeted at the so-called 'squeezed middle' – intermediate quality land between prime farmland and open hill? Though such areas are extensive, they cannot simultaneously accommodate all the bold visions for forest expansion, rewilding, wind power, energy crops, agroforestry, high nature value farming, and more that are championed. Difficult choices abound. For example, both tree planting and peatland restoration have strong climate change credentials, but choosing which is the better option here is sometimes far from straightforward.

So how can such tensions and difficulties be addressed? This brings us back to the importance of making land use management decisions in a more strategic and integrated fashion. The SG's pioneering Land Use Strategy is a step in this direction but has yet to deliver its strategic potential. Many advocate collaborative initiatives. While certainly no panacea, they can be very constructive, especially when they draw on local knowledge and expertise to address local



Ptarmigan. © Desmond Dugan

problems in locally appropriate ways. Cairngorms Connect is one such initiative, a partnership of neighbouring land managers committed to a 200-year vision to enhance habitats, species and ecological processes across 10% of the Cairngorms National Park, while the SLC has high hopes that the new Regional Land Use Partnerships will deliver positive change. To be successful, they will need to build regional consensus, and experience

suggests that this may be neither easy nor swift. In places, in order to help these and other initiatives fulfil their potential, there may be a need for more targeted financial incentives to enable upland managers to deliver public goods on their land; public support for public goods. This could perhaps be one element of a post-Covid-19, post-Brexit reorientation.

The way in which the uplands are managed will play an important part in delivering Scotland's ambitious climate targets, and this chimes with SG's avowed desire for a green post-Covid-19 recovery. Looking ahead, one of the interesting questions is the appropriate mix of top-down and bottom-up decision making. Should land managers align their plans with a national vision for the uplands, or should their future be allowed to emerge from the fusion of place-based initiatives delivered through local and regional collaborations? The scale and locus of decision making will be important determinants of the future of the Scottish uplands.

