

## **The role of land management in the uplands**

I am very grateful to Moors for the Future for giving me this opportunity to talk to you. I am not a scientist, nor an environmentalist but instead I am someone who manages land in the uplands of both England and Scotland. You may be pleased or disappointed that there are no complicated visuals with my talk. I have been involved to varying degrees in grouse moors in the Peak District for 45 years, which I guess is longer than most people here. My Firm manages or consults on over 100,000 acres of moorland in England and Scotland, with about 20,000 acres of that in the Peak District. Essentially I act for private landowners, almost all of whom own or rent their moorland primarily for grouse shooting. I realise that this may make me seem an anachronism as well as politically incorrect and I apologise in advance if some of what I say may not be music to some people's ears. I am however, very grateful for the opportunity of trying to explain where my clients, their employees and I come from. It will almost certainly be a long long way from many of your own perspectives, but I would firstly ask you whether that necessarily makes me wrong and you right? In fact I would like perhaps naively, to question the stereotypes, the prejudices of all of our positions, whether we think of them as right or wrong or even of left or right.

If I have one overall instruction from my private clients it is to "*look after their moor*" and then to maximise red grouse production. I entirely accept that this may make us tunnel-visioned. However, we can hardly be accused of changing course according to fashion! Not for us planting conifers on deep peat or ploughing up heather to grow grass, which sadly has over my lifetime been the case with various Government Ministries advised by bodies of experts. Some of our scepticism and indeed cynicism may arise from having heard what was the perceived official wisdom of the day - which 20 years later is often regarded as completely and utterly wrong. Examples might be digging grips or planting conifers but there have been others as well.

Perhaps, surprisingly I do not believe that my way of managing heather moorland is "right" – whatever that may mean. I say this because I worry that many people from my world believe that their view of upland management is the "ideal prescription". It may be that it is the ideal prescription for what they want, but by its very definition, it

almost certainly isn't the only way that the uplands can be managed and right is as I hope I have already described, often wrong with the benefit of hindsight, let alone from where any particular party stands.

Similarly, I am afraid that there has often been an arrogance on the part of some other groups involved in the uplands, who seem to regard anything said by those without a degree or by those not employed by a Government organisation (or maybe the RSPB), as **anecdotal** and hence not really worth taking note of. I was disappointed to note that even Sir Martin Doughty in the film which started this conference, mentioned all sorts of people but **Not** private owners.

Some people in Natural England have been particularly good at building bridges between the private and public sector, so too has Rod Starbuck with the Dark Peak ESA project. However, there is a feeling on the private owner's side that many in authority, either seek to ignore them, (perhaps hoping they will go away) or that private owners can be sidelined – a strange view of the owner of an asset in what is still a capitalist country. Interestingly, I see that my three richest grouse moor owners have a combined personal wealth greater than the market capitalisation of United Utilities!

Let's look at the figures; whilst over half the Peak District's heather moorland may be owned by United Utilities, Yorkshire Water, The National Trust and the Peak Park, a significant amount is still privately owned. On a national scale, less than 4% of all heather moorland is publicly owned. Over 96% is in private hands.

We heard some fantastic talks yesterday – much that was way beyond me. However, what DEFRA, the EA, Natural England or anyone else say or do, it will be the Land owner or Land occupier who will have to put it into practice. However desirable further improving our heather moorlands is and however it is to be done – I ask you, who will do it? We will. Therefore we need to be engaged and encouraged.

Take grip blocking – over 90% of all grips are on privately owned land. Do you seriously believe that this can and will occur without not only the consent, but the active involvement of the private land owner?

The majority of private owners are not now grant led. They are passionately keen owners, perhaps for reasons which many here cannot emphasise with, but we have to go beyond anything as simplistic as private ownership being bad for the uplands and public ownership being good. Sadly there is in many quarters and on both sides of the equation, that simplistic perception. Defining good or bad does depend on who you are and from where you are coming from.

Our heather moorland is a National and may in our modern world, be an International asset. It is greatly appreciated by those who live near or amongst it and those who visit it. It is a major source of carbon storage and in all ways of immeasurable benefit to all of us – however, it is owned by somebody and as well as being much admired and needed, it is also the place where some people live and work. It is not a sterile landscape. It is not a museum exhibit.

It is used and it has to be managed. Indeed it has to be cared for. Money has to be spent on it and humans have to physically do things on or to it, whether that be light fires or put them out. Farm the land, repair footpaths, build bridges, erect walls, maintain fences, create grips or indeed block grips, plant trees or even cut them down. There is a whole range of work that goes on that has to be done by people, much of this work is not and probably cannot, be paid for by the public purse.

I think we are in danger and maybe this conference is reflective of that, of many people who have power over what we do on these areas of moorland but do not necessarily take proper responsibility. These people tell those of us who own, manage, farm keeper or otherwise work on the moors, who may on the face of it not seem so educated or informed, what **we as practitioners on the ground**, should be doing. However, do they or is it you, really know? We have the interesting situation where experts who discuss burning, have never been burning. Others talk about sheep grazing knowing nothing about ruminant management. What a bizarre situation where the theorists control the practical.

I along with many others work to conserve and manage these areas. Little of what we do is theory. Instead it is a balance.

A balance between sheep and grouse.

A balance between private land and public access.

A balance between preserving the unspoilt landscape and yet being able to get machinery onto the hill. Pretty well everything in the uplands has to be balanced.

The sheep industry is in absolute turmoil. This summers, foot and mouth as well as Blue tongue have caused mayhem. Upland sheep farmers are going to struggle to survive, particularly those without ESA or HLS payments. Somehow we will have to deal with this. There has to be farming – as a strong capitalist, I can see no moral justification, let alone obvious merit in a world where a third of the population starves or is on subsistence food level and at the same time, we play with wilding and not farming these vast areas.

In short we as humans have always used our assets in what we now call multidisciplinary ways and that I think should be encouraged to continue.

Like many, I found the assessment by Natural England of moorland as being in favourable or unfavourable condition as rather arbitrary and not really joined up. The way it was presented was not ideal – who wants to be told that their land has been classed as unfavourable and yet that land is an SSSI, SPA, SAC, is in a National Park or whatever? Come on guys get real! We all accept that there is moorland in both public and private ownership which has been badly managed, but the speed of turnaround between unfavourable and then to favourable in some instances truly astounds me! If these moors are owned by public bodies, I fall into the trap of being cynical, which of course is not the way it should be. I do however, think that the whole notion of what is and what is not in favourable condition was poorly thought out at the outset was badly explained to an unscientific audience and has caused much confusion and not a little resentment since. This is just an example of there being too little joined up thought or action between the theorists and the people on the ground.

Those moorland owners, agents and keepers who believe that all they do is right are no better nor worse than those people from Natural England, the Peak Park, SNH, the RSPB etc. who believe that only they have a monopoly on knowledge. We don't and

despite your Doctorate and your position in Authority – you don't either. I am tired of being lectured by theoreticians who have no real affinity nor bond with the land which some of us have been involved with for years, when they or may be you may well in two or three years time depart for pastures new. Compare this to Roger France who has been helping to look after the Snake Moors for 40 years working on the same ground and Andrew Chadwick who is the second generation keeper on Parkhall – but Andrew has only been working there for 22 years! No they are not experts in every subject and undoubtedly they are to some degree biased, but we should acknowledge that they and their ilk who have a detailed local knowledge, are out all day and every day, have a real passion for their patch, and can probably teach many in this room a great deal. The same goes for very many farmers. Yes there have been stupid instances of over-grazing and other bad practice, but who encouraged it, and who grant aided it?

We have had a talk from Geoff Eyre. A real local hero. Here is a man who because of his passion devised the best way to restore heather moorland and then got on and did it.

He didn't pontificate. He didn't write a book and today's paper is the first I have heard from him – what he did with no financial motive was to put into practice that which he devised.

When I hear people in Authority criticise Geoff, I get really mad. Of course we don't want wall to wall heather overall our uplands, but if you really do believe in sustainability then we have to have a purpose for our uplands which is outwith the scope of the public purse. Additional public ownership is dead. Even socialists with a bean counter appreciate that.

Whether we like or believe in the private ownership of moorland and what those private owners want, they are still here and very possibly given how I believe public funding will work in the future, at a time of so many calls on the public purse, these private owners may be the very people who can best deliver desirable objectives on their moors in the years to come. Somehow writing them off as dinosaurs or bit players would be a mistake, because I genuinely cannot see much support for

increased public funding of conservation projects when we appear unable as a country to fully fund our hospitals, schools, transport, infrastructure, Army etc. However, the private sector does have a real vested interest and just as importantly a real reason to engage in the whole moorland debate. We in the private sector might ideally not want to and would prefer to be left alone, but most of us can now see the need to play an active part.

To achieve what is needed, we must not just talk about working in partnership, we must actually do it. We need less stick and more carrot and not of the pecuniary type. I think that in the Peak District, as elsewhere, we should all accept that most of our open heather moors are as they are, because of the selfish desire on the part of a few private owners to shoot grouse. This objective may perhaps be insular, myopic or even unattractive in outlook, but by accident or design it has achieved a lot to date. It has not all been perfect, far from it, but on the whole it hasn't been that bad either and a great great deal better than over-grazing by sheep, ploughing out heather and reseeding with grass or planting with trees. Candidly I don't think that there is any evidence that moorland in public ownership has fared any better and indeed some is a good deal worse suffering from lack of clarity in defining objectives and muddled management. Of course some private owners achieve that as well!

I want to see the private sector fully engaged. I would like to see them leading the debate because in that modern idiom, as stakeholders they are major. 94% is an awful lot of land. Maybe at a conference like this in 10 years time, there might actually be more attendees from the private rather than the public sector. Who knows? If I am even half right, the money supply from public funds will in real terms be much reduced, which will mean either less good being done on the moors or the private sector taking on more of the input. In principle I am not against this and believe that we all have to accept that preserving the uplands costs money. Few people are altruistic, but if the private owner sees benefit, such as by shooting grouse, then however odd their reasoning, there is good logic for them to invest for the future. I genuinely believe that in many instances the private sector is more forward thinking than the public. But I probably would say that wouldn't I? Seriously much of the credit for the more modern approach of private owners is because of the influence and work of The Moorland Association.

In the interim, whilst we debate and discuss, the men on the ground get on with the work. Not for them the papers, the theory, the thesis, but instead doing what needs to be done, day after day to keep the moors largely as they are and largely as the majority of people want! We shouldn't forget this. We talk but they do.

I am encouraged that through the auspices of Moors for the Future and others, we now have a framework to build on. I for one was initially very sceptical of Moors for the Future. I am however, the first to admit I was wrong. They have been a real unifying force, building bridges where before there was division. It really does behold all of us, from whichever perspective we come from, to try and ensure that there is a real sense of partnership in the future and not of polarisation or even worse an imposition of views which may be right but with hindsight could indeed be wrong as indeed they have been before. We ALL need to remember that we do not, whether we are in the private or the public sector, whether we work for Natural England or indeed J. M. Osborne & Co, have a monopoly on knowledge.

Thank you for listening to me.

**J. M. Osborne**