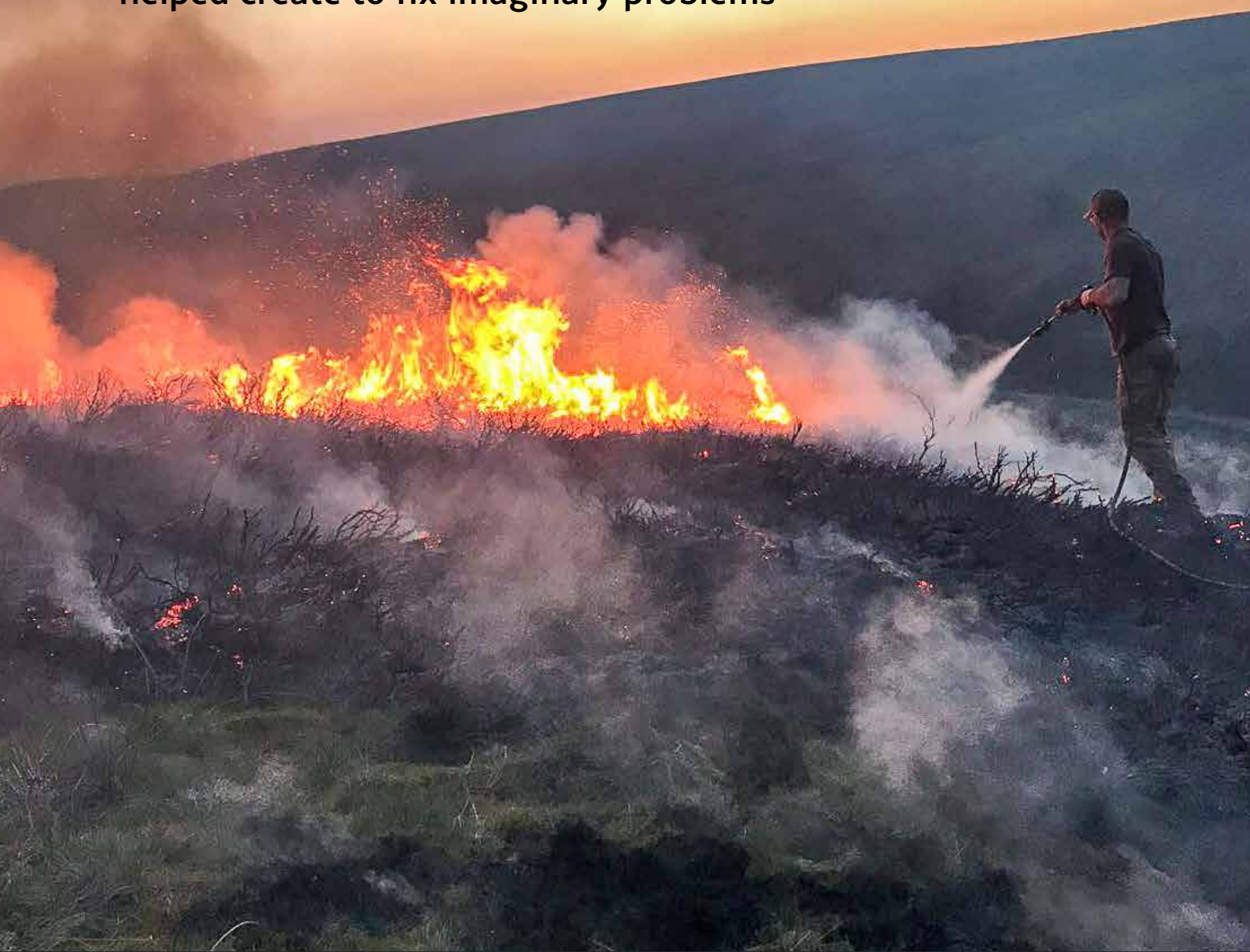


Burning Money

How nature groups cash in on disastrous policies they helped create to fix imaginary problems



Commissioned by the Campaign for the Protection of Moorland Communities. Protecting Jobs, Preventing Wildfires and Preserving Nature across the uplands.





The Campaign for the Protection of Moorland Communities is a group dedicated to protecting moorland communities by providing advocacy and communications support to individuals and local businesses within the uplands. **For more information please see: www.c4pmc.co.uk**



Above: Andreas Heinemeyer at a plot of land used in his long-term study on the effects of cutting and burning. **Below:** one of the plots being measured before a burn. *Photos: Conor and Andreas Heinemeyer*



Interviewees and contributors:

- Geoff Eyre**, Agronomist and Conservationist
James Fenton, Ecologist
Andreas Heinemeyer, Senior Research Fellow (Associate Professor), Ecosystem Ecology
Steven Gibson, Wildfire Operations Specialist, Incendium Wildfire Solutions
Richard Bailey, Moorland Project Officer and Peak District Moorland Group Coordinator
Harold Smith, Farmer
Peter Atkin, Farmer
Roger France, Retired Gamekeeper
Jim, Gamekeeper
Robin Pakeman, Plant Ecologist
Charlie, Farming Consultant
David, Land Manager
Aaron, Land Manager
Gary, Land Agent
Meredyth, Financial Consultant
Nick, Land Agent

The Author **AB O'Rourke**

Has worked in the media for 30 years, including 13 writing, producing and subediting daily news programmes for Hong Kong television. As deputy foreign editor of the South China Morning Post, he was responsible for international coverage, online and in print. Besides news, he has written, filmed and produced documentaries in Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines. In the UK, he spent two years as news editor of Fieldsports Channel, producing reports on rural affairs, gun licensing, conservation and politics. He lives in the north of England.

Contents

Understanding heather moorland	8
The importance of fuel load control	10
'Ban the burn'	15
Cutting versus burning	19
The 'rewetting' fantasy	26
Farmers not farming	31
Curlews not crops	34
Mountain hares	38
Managing perceptions	40
Great crested newts!	43
National mistrust	47
Scheming	52
The SSSI kiss of death	57

A mountain hare in the Dark Peak area. Photo: RMBaileyMedia



Executive Summary

There is a feeling among rural businesses, farmers, landowners and communities that rules affecting them, their livelihoods and habitats are irrational, with no consideration of what came before or their long-term impact. They accuse the authorities of disregarding generations of knowledge, skills and techniques in favour of unproven and expensive trends that are sold as remedies to problems that may never appear.

A fire warning sign at Hatfield Moors. Photo: LB Garcia



This report looks at some of those issues from the perspective of Peak District residents. As inhabitants of England's oldest national park, they have dealt with government bureaucracy and meddling in their affairs almost since the Second World War. Some say the growing disregard is part of a slow-motion takeover, as tenancies are cut short, farms vacated and land left to rot and burn.

Natural England is largely responsible for the safeguards designed to prevent this downturn, yet has allowed itself to be influenced by third-party groups such as wildlife charities. Swayed by their questionable research, Natural England is promoting their belief system and turning it into policy, ignoring common sense and proven successes.

The biggest threat to life on Peak District moors is wildfire. Proper fuel load management is essential yet not taken seriously by Natural England, landowner the National Trust or wildlife charity Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), despite warnings of catastrophic wildfires if this isn't done.

They do not understand the risk, so deny or delay permission for access roads onto moors, which would help firefighters. History has shown that wet summers, like 2024, are followed by busy fire seasons. Since most blazes are on National Trust, RSPB and Natural England moors, disastrous infernos are possible.

Furthermore, because of the widely-disputed yet frequently-repeated claim that the UK is 'one of the most nature-depleted countries', a biodiversity net gain (BNG) law has been introduced demanding developers make sure there is more nature around the land they build on than before. This came after years of lobbying from the RSPB. The task of nature creation is usually passed on to farmers or wildlife groups, allowing the developers to wash their hands of responsibility. Farmers are fighting to keep their industry alive and may risk losing their land in BNG schemes.

Short-term schemes farmers are pushed into often have no long-term

People don't have an understanding of long-term nature ecology **James Fenton**

effects or recognisable benefits and amount to public relations exercises. Goals of some projects regularly contradict previous policies. On peat moorland, which rarely changes over centuries, long-term effects are often negligible, yet millions of pounds of public money is being spent on them.

"The natural ecosystems of moorland can be stable for thousands of years or not change much," says ecologist James Fenton. "I think people don't have an understanding of long-term nature ecology."

At the same, there is much misinformation about moorlands that is picked up by the media, adding influence to policy decisions. When looking at the consequences of each

The south-western edge of Saddleworth moor, where fire spread in the devastating 2018 blaze. Photo: LB Garcia





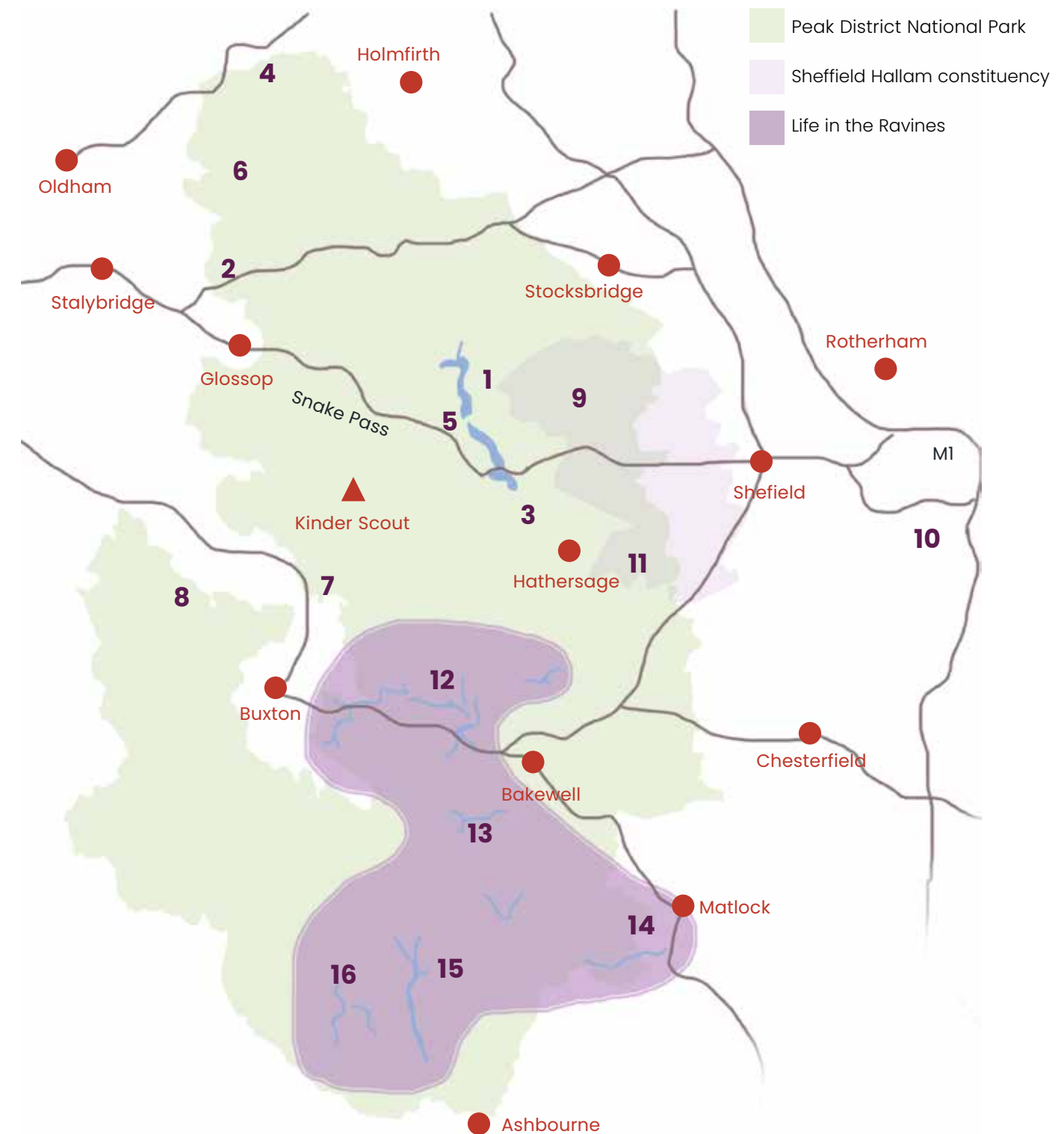
action, the conversation regularly turns to Natural England and how its mismanagement and misleading principles and policies are negatively affecting the countryside. When recommending actions based on the information contained in this report, the first would be a complete overhaul of the body, as the problems it causes outweigh the benefits produced. This is the next best thing to shutting it down completely, which some may argue is unrealistic.

Natural England is intensely disliked for its senseless decisions, foggy chain of command and lack of competent staff. Licensing systems are slow, unnecessarily complicated and applicants have been refused for reasons that don't apply to them. The General Licence and burning and cutting licences are essential for moorland management, in terms of protecting wildlife and minimising the risk of wildfires, yet they are not easy to get.

The SSSI system is being abused by Natural England and the wildlife organisations it chooses to take advice from. Private landowners gain nothing positive from SSSI status and the movement to strip Natural England from the designation process is a step away from what has become backdoor nationalisation.

There needs to be independence in the choosing of 'experts' to advise Natural England, as well as reports and studies it relies on when creating policies. The peer review system is also broken, with groundbreaking research on fuel load management dismissed by Natural England because there are no similar studies to compare it with. Simply put, a body that has so much say over land, wildlife and people's livelihoods should not be wasting millions in public money while ignoring the perspectives and decades of experience of those who live and work on the land and are clamouring for their voices to be heard.

Peak District locations



- 1 Howden Moor
- 2 Tintwistle Knarr
- 3 Bamford Edge
- 4 Marsden
- 5 Derwent Dam
- 6 Saddleworth Moor

- 7 Dove Holes
- 8 Upper Goyt Valley
- 9 Ughill Farm
- 10 Wildscapes newt ponds
- 11 Bilberry bumblebees

- 12 Monk's Dale, Wye Valley, Cressbrook Dale
- 13 Lathkill Dale
- 14 Matlock Dale
- 15 Dove Valley, Biggin Dale
- 16 Hamps Valley, Manifold Valley

Dismissing myths about burning damaging peat
and wetting stopping flooding on 'degraded' moors

Part one: Restoration

Understanding heather moorland

Howden Moor lies on the northeast corner of the Upper Derwent Valley, which contains Howden and Derwent reservoirs, created at the turn of the 20th Century. The valley stretches from Derbyshire north through the centre of England's Peak District, into South Yorkshire, close to Sheffield. Much of the surrounding area is owned by the National Trust. This includes Kinder Scout, the national park's highest point, in the east towards the edge of Greater Manchester.

In the 1980s, Geoff Eyre leased Howden Moor from the National Trust. His wife's father was the previous tenant and Eyre helped him manage the 2,900-hectare estate. When his father-in-law retired, he took over the 20-year lease to run shoots on the land.

Howden Moor seen from the reservoir. Photo: LB Garcia



"It was a grouse moor. We were burning and looking after it like you do," he says. "In 1990, the Joint Nature Conservancy Committee (JNCC) found out we'd lost so much heather in the Peak District after the war that they wanted to stop the loss." They designated it an Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) and wanted sheep to be spread and at least 10% of bracken burnt off every year. "We never achieved that amount, so they offered more money so we could employ more people to burn. That's what we were pushed to do."

On moors, prescribed/controlled burning or muirburn is the use of fire to maintain heather at a level where it benefits local wildlife, allows other plants to thrive and reduces the fuel load, lowering the risk of wildfires. It also encourages the growth of young heather. Eyre says he received letters from the Ministry of Agriculture Fishery and Foods (MAFF) saying his team was not doing enough burning. "We did eventually. Then I got into looking at trying to restore heather."

He developed a variation of controlled burning known as 'cool burning', conducted earlier in the year when it is wetter and safer. It is now used on most of the UK's grouse moors.

Eyre's work restoring Howden Moor earned him the nickname 'heather doctor', as he pioneered a technique for removing *Molinia* (moor grass) and bracken. In recognition of this, Liverpool University awarded him an honorary degree. His work has stood the test of time. "There was a programme on television the other day, with Bill Bailey walking across one of my moors up here, and he's walking into the heather that I grew that used to be bracken."

Bracken has long been a feature on England's moorland and elsewhere, but it's not popular with land managers. "Nothing eats it and it smothers everything else," says Roger France, a retired gamekeeper from Glossop.

Around the same time Eyre started clearing bracken from the moors, studies by Danish scientist Lars Holm Rasmussen showed it to be poisonous to some animals and containing a cancer-causing chemical. "[He] found that in Venezuela, Japan, even Wales, people drinking bracken water out of a well were dying from stomach cancer," Eyre recalls.

Bracken was prominent in catchment areas and since the chemical inside cannot be removed from water, the need to get rid of it increased. It is invasive, colonising much of moorland areas from common plants like heather. Eyre's work ridding toxic bracken at Howden was recognised as essential conservation.

MAFF and the JNCC encouraged Eyre to expand his work. After MAFF became English Nature, it honoured him with another award, then changed its name again to the current one: Natural England.

"In the end, I [cleared] 5,000 acres (2,000 hectares) in the Peak District of *Molinia*... We were burning hard or employing more people to burn every day. Put it back to heather, pioneered revegetating a large area of bare peat back to heath. Sadly, through Natural England restricting fire breaks, these



early vegetated bare peat areas went in the 2018 Saddleworth wildfire (also referred to as the Stalybridge fire).

A gamekeeper putting out a blaze on Saddleworth Moor in 2018. Photo: RMBaileyMedia

"I won the Purdey Gold award in 2005 after I restored 700 hectares of poor habitat. The area had then seen an explosion of wildlife with some species like skylarks and meadow pipits too numerous to count and we saw the first hen harrier breed in 140 years using this abundance of available food to rear young. The National Trust manager at the time had supported my entry, [but] by 2010 they started to stop us burning a large amount."

Inconsistencies in policy have become an unofficial trademark of Natural England. These changes are often followed by refusals to explain why they've been made or justifications based on disputed studies. Frustration gives way to submission, as attempts to overturn controversial rules prove futile. At the same time, lobbying from animal rights groups like Wild Justice has seen the government body devote a disproportionate amount of time and money to questionable complaints, at the expense of species, habitats, livelihoods and the taxpayer.

"It's been so confusing how Natural England have suddenly changed tune,"



Bamford in the Hope Valley. Photo: LB Garcia

complains Eyre. “First they wanted it burning and heather back and now they don’t want heather at all and they don’t want it burning and they’ve moved on to wanting it wetter.”

The lack of fuel load management concerned Eyre and his staff at the time, but they were muzzled by their landlord, the National Trust, which introduced a strict no-burn rule. “We had a wildfire and my keeper said to a reporter, ‘Well, we wouldn’t have had as big a wildfire if we’d been allowed to rotation burn’. He got reprimanded by the manager saying that he was disingenuous about the National Trust position.” The keeper had had to gather a few dozen others and farmers to put the blaze out.

A fire on Howden Moor in 2016 broke out on the first piece of ground the National Trust fenced off to let the moor go wild about 20 years earlier. Eyre says it destroyed 200 acres of Oaken Bank. “I think it burnt all the posts... burnt all the signs and things like that. Burnt a lot of the trees.”

Aftermath of the Oaken Bank fire in 2016. Photo: Geoff Eyre



and most of Eyre’s early restoration has turned into dense scrub. Within 30 years, the moor has been designated a SSSI (1993), Molinia to mixed heath under the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme and is now trees on blanket bog.

As part of the Uplands Management Group, Eyre told the National Trust he disagreed with its strategy due to the risk of a large fire. His concerns were ignored.

The importance of fuel load control

Routine fuel load reduction is vital, as the greater the load, the hotter and more prolonged the fire, increasing the potential for devastating damage to the landscape. On Peak District moors, reducing the fuel load means controlling the heather. Burning creates breaks which can limit and slow the spread of fire.

Geoff Eyre manicured his moors to award-winning standards, but refusal by the owners to reduce the fuel load resulted in years of work going up in flames. However, there was neither reprimand nor repentance.

When wildfires occur on National Trust or RSPB land, the charities are not held responsible despite their complicity in the disaster. “They don’t get blamed [but] they created the fire, because they’ve not done anything to prevent it,” Eyre argues. What’s more,

he suggests wildfires have been used by land-owning nature charities to attract public donations and funding from the government when they become victims.

Perhaps the response of the landowners stems from them not being the ones who have done the work turning large areas of unmanaged land into SSSIs or other protected designations. An extraordinary amount of funding is poured into the moors and in many cases, it’s not the RSPB or National Trust’s cash.

Steve Gibson, a specialist in wildfire operations, was at the devastating Saddleworth Moor and Winter Hill fires in 2018. He describes that landscape as having been “unmanaged in relation to the risk posed by wildfire” and with “a huge build-up of fuel ready to burn”. He says that if you have a landscape where the fuels haven’t been managed, wildfires can be dangerous and damaging, including to the subsurface peat, the very thing Natural England claims it is trying to protect. “Due to a lack of forethought regarding fuel management and the lack of strategic planning that creates opportunities to contain fire spread, fire intensities at times were well beyond the threshold of control of the Fire and Rescue Service and the fire itself dictated its eventual size.”

Adding to the problem are intensive replanting and rewilding schemes

on moorland, which increase the fuel load. A lot of this work is done by Moors for the Future, a quango of the National Park.

“Following a number of major wildfires, Moors for the Future spent huge amounts of money and time on restoration,” says Gibson. “They seem to think the solution following a fire is simply to restore the area by replanting vegetation. In reality they are just refuelling fire prone areas and rebuilding the level of risk. They should recognise that in a fire prone area, it is likely that fires will occur again, so plan with this in mind, build fire resilience amongst the vegetation, create areas where responders know they can succeed and prevent fire from spreading.”

Map of the area burnt in the Saddleworth Moor fire in 2018.



The Saddleworth and Winter Hill fires lasted about a month and caused millions of pounds of damage, as well as crippling ecosystems the Wildlife Trust said would take years to recover. With the increase in fuel loads, worse fires are on the horizon,

Gibson is concerned that Defra and Natural England want to further restrict fuel management, with little evidence to justify the move: “The people working in the uplands who have the skills and equipment necessary to manage the wildfire risk could be utilised by government to manage the fuels in a sensible way. Instead, in many areas they are being replaced

by people that simply want to rewild huge areas, without any regard to the increase in wildfire risk and the threat this will pose to the natural environment [such as] fires beyond the threshold of control of responders, placing firefighters at significant risk of harm or even death.”

Charlie, a farming consultant, agrees. “Where you’ve got the big vegetation loads, it becomes almost impossible to fight the fire and bring it back under control.”

The strain on resources can be phenomenal in certain conditions, says Gibson, who recalls a huge fire in Northumberland where the land manager had not been allowed to reduce the fuel load. He thinks it resulted in 17 SSSI sites being lost in one afternoon, stretching local fire services to their limit.

Retired gamekeeper Roger France was a member of the Fire Operations Group, made up of landowners, gamekeepers, farmers, nature groups, water companies and the national park. He fought many wildfires over the years, often on National Trust and RSPB land, and suggests the people managing these organisations have no idea what it’s like standing face to face with fire and the lack of comprehension leads to poorly-made decisions. France believes the inexperience is widespread and sometimes, training doesn’t prepare people for what’s needed on the ground.

“They put what we call ‘fogging’ machines on [Argocats],” he says. “They put 80 gallons of water in the back and it has two pumps. A pump so they can fill it and a pump then to spray a jet or a thick mass of water vapour to help knock fires out. What people don’t realise is, after you’ve driven your Argocat round these cones and everything [in training], you get that tank in the back with 80 gallons of water, it is a totally different animal to drive.

Roger France: Tintwistle Knarr fire

“About 10 years ago I went to a fire [north of Glossop] and there was a young fireman with a number of others, and this fire was going up a steep, rocky bank. He said, ‘Do you know anything about these fires? I come out of Manchester. You show me a house on fire and I’ll show you how to go on with it. This stuff... I’m lost’.

So they’re standing there with the beaters flapping on this thing and I said, ‘Slow down a minute. When you put your beater down, just leave it two or three seconds to smother the fire’.

And they started being able to put it out and after a bit, I said, ‘You have another 30 yards to go then we’re through this rough stuff and it’ll be a lot easier’, which it was.

Eventually we put it out. At the top there was the National Park, National Trust, fire brigades, some gamekeepers and farmers. Not a sign of the RSPB whose ground it was.

One of these lads told me he’d seen a nest with four eggs in. Fire had gone through it and it was jiggered. He said, ‘What would it be?’ I said, ‘It could have been any of a number of things’.

Just as I was leaving them, the RSPB turned up with a Land Rover to give them a lift down to the fire engine.

The next FOG (Fire Operations Group) meeting we had, I thought the RSPB will come up with a report saying what nests had been lost or damaged. They didn’t even mention the fire.”



“When they had that fire at Howden, the national park had an Argocat with a fogging machine on. So this girl took it up this narrow, steep track and managed to roll it over. She had a passenger sat on the back, so when it rolled, it pinned the passenger under the roll cage. They had to shout and get a load of help to lift things up so they could get this poor sod out from underneath. There’s just not the experience.”

“The fire brigade have seen these and they all want them now because keepers have been very efficient controlling fire,” says Eyre. “When we’ve had a wildfire and the keepers have turned up to put it out, they’ve watched them come in with all the kit and know what they’re doing. So now they seem to be wanting huge grants to buy all this equipment that keepers have been using [and] their bosses paid for.”

“America, South Africa and right across southern Europe, including France, Portugal and Spain, are using fire, even when in the past some of them didn’t,” says Gibson. “They have learnt that fire is a legitimate and effective way of managing fuel loads. There is credible evidence carried

out here in the UK that suggests that controlled burning in the long term is not as damaging to the environment as cutting.

“One of the biggest problems in Spain and in Portugal, is land abandonment. [The countryside] in the past was dominated by peasant farmers who’ve opted for an easier life by moving to the towns and cities. There’s no one left managing the uplands, so that’s simply become rewilded and reforested. This has resulted in a huge increase in fuel load across much of the Iberian Peninsula [and] new fire types that are hugely problematic... sometimes measuring many thousands of hectares. For reasons that are not economic, but in cases politically motivated, we are starting to see a similar shift here.”

Studies on fire behaviour in northern Spain are at the forefront of global wildfire mitigation research and their fire models were adapted for use in Gibson’s risk assessments. However, the research has been rejected by UK academics working on behalf of Natural England. The media also spreads misinformation about the moors and wildfires, based on

Gamekeepers by an Argocat at the 2018 wildfire in Goyt Valley. Photo: RMBaileyMedia

Keepers dealing with the Oaken Bank fire in 2016. Photo: Geoff Eyre



They don't
get blamed
[but] they
created the
fire, because
they've
not done
anything to
prevent it
Geoff Eyre

misleading press releases from nature groups.

"There was a fire over at Dove Holes," says France. "Six months later, there's a reporter bouncing about [the vegetation] coming back after the big fire. It showed some film of bracken coming up through the burnt ground. Bracken's no good to anybody, you know, but this is the mentality."

Olivia Blake is the Labour Party member of parliament for the Sheffield Hallam constituency, which stretches onto moorland where controlled burning takes place. In a debate at Westminster Hall in November 2020, she claimed most wildfires are caused by controlled burning getting out of hand, quoting the "most recent research" at the time. When questioned, Blake admitted her sole source was the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) UK Peatland Programme position statement.

The debate was designed to get the government to ban controlled burning, which Blake said would "ensure that people who seek to burn protected peatlands face the full weight of the law". She did not mention what would happen to landowners whose poor fuel load management results in dangerous and destructive fires.

In January 2024, she updated lawmakers: "The current [burning] licensing regime came shortly after [the 2020] debate... but when I read the details of the regulations in 2021, they left a lot to be desired. Licensing is only required on peatland of a depth of 40cm or more. Three years later, it's useful to take stock to see if the new regulatory regime is working for the peatlands... Unfortunately, data from the RSPB suggests it isn't."

With licences needed for controlled burning and cutting, Natural England makes it inconvenient for people trying to manage fuel loads. "We are under such restrictions in terms of vegetation

management," says Aaron, a Peak District land manager. "It's very difficult to get cutting licences and they are for cutting such small amounts that it really doesn't make much difference."

Gamekeeper **Jim** on the 2018 Stalybridge fire

"If we end up with a summer wildfire in the middle of the National Trust ground, which is right in the middle of everybody else, whichever way the wind's blowing it is going to do significant damage.

The Stalybridge fire in 2018, that ended up on national news. The army was there trying to help put it out. That was extremely lucky, because the wind was blowing eastwards and it went out at Stalybridge. If the wind was going the other way, that could have gone out in Barnsley, you know what I mean? [It was] on that sort of scale.

I spent a week on that fire and we were trying to put the back fire out that was burning into the wind. So if you can imagine what it was like at the other side with the wind behind it. That was like nothing I've ever seen before in my life.

We took all the estate equipment over, so we had the Argocat with the fogging unit on, leaf blowers, fire beaters, Scotty packs... I was single-handed, so I took my equipment there and [asked], 'Can somebody drive this machine while I get on the lance?' One of the fire guys jumped on it.

That first night when that fire kicked off, the wind was moving and it split into 15 different fires and there was people between. That was really close to losing a life that night. Really close."

'Ban the burn'

In her push for a ban on burning heather, Olivia Blake has implied it is evil because it produces carbon dioxide, an essential atmospheric gas some scientists claim causes apocalyptic climate change. "We not only have a moral imperative to ban this destructive practice, but an environmental imperative, an ecological and an existential imperative to protect and restore our precious peatlands." There is no evidence to support her claims.

Protecting peat has become a cause of climate catastrophists because it is seen as a way of storing carbon dioxide from plants absorbed over millennia. Claims controlled burning damages peat, releasing the CO₂, are made by the National Trust and RSPB, which hold up the 2018 report *Prescribed burning, atmospheric pollution and grazing effects on peatland vegetation composition* as proof. Known as *Ember*, it was produced at Leeds University and funded by Natural England.

"Our results suggest that burning, atmospheric pollution and livestock presence are all associated with modified Peatland vegetation," says *Ember's* conclusion, which warns that if the practices continue, certain types of undesirable algae and moss will flourish and desirable vegetation diminish, notably sphagnum moss. "Livestock presence was also associated negatively with Sphagnum cover and we suggest that the use of burning and grazing as management tools on peatlands should be approached with caution where restoration or maintenance of active, peat-forming vegetation is an aim."

The report has had a considerable impact on Natural England's policies and land owned or managed by National Trust and RSPB have reduced burning to zero in some places, and cut sheep on tenant farms.

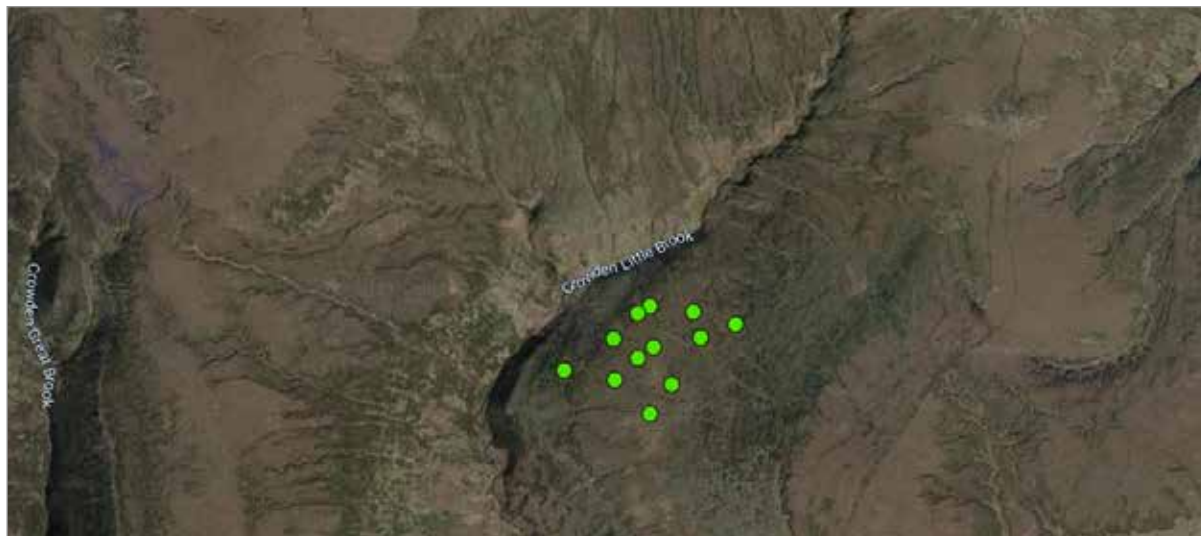
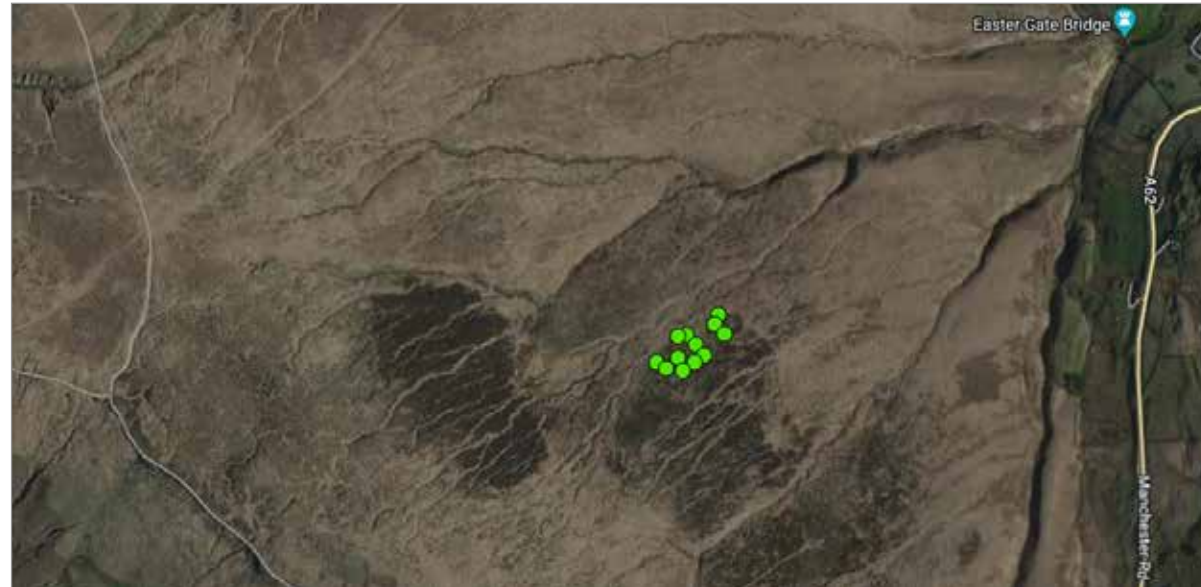


Sheep are arguably the most natural form of fuel load management, with them grazing on heather, keeping it at a manageable length. But *Ember* says 'no'. The reduction of sheep coupled with the decline in burning is a "perfect storm" of fuel load build-up, according to Steve Gibson. "At the minute, it's not just burning that Natural England's against, they're basically restricting most forms of practical fuel management."

Despite its influence, the report is flawed. Geoff Eyre points out two areas identified in *Ember* as no-burn zones were burned in the past. "One was an RSPB and one was a National Trust over the other side. They'd stopped burning for 10 years, but I know the farmers and they'd been burning before that. [The researchers] came out with these figures that the pH was different, a few invertebrates were different and they thought the water ran off the burns faster. Anyway, right in the middle of this research work, [which they] got £650,000 for, both the no-burn moors, Marsden and Crowden, burned out."

At the University of York, ecologist Andreas Heinemeyer says *Ember* is "experimentally flawed". With ecologist Mark Ashby, Heinemeyer cowrote *Prescribed burning impacts on ecosystem services in the British uplands: A methodological critique of the EMBER project*, which examines the flaws, some of which are shared with

Sheffield Hallam Labour MP Olivia Blake speaking at Action for Wildlife Day (formerly Hen Harrier Day) at Carsington Water, Derbyshire, in August 2024.
Photo: LB Garcia



Top: Ember burn plots near Easter Gate Bridge (1) **Above:** Ember plots at Crowden Little Brook (2)
Below: Area map with locations highlighted. Images: Mark Ashby/Google Maps



other studies that negatively criticise controlled heather burning.

“What they have done is placed all the burn plots in the east, lower down in the Pennines, and the unburned ones further west, higher up. Now what happens to rainfall in the UK when you are higher up and further west? It gets wetter... So all their unburned control sites are naturally going to be much wetter and cooler.” Basically, he says, “They are comparing apples and oranges.”

The *Ember* authors did not account for “confounding factors such as climate, rainfall or drainage”, says Heinemeyer. “It is like a trial of comparing the impact of a blood pressure medicine without measuring the blood pressure of trial patients beforehand... Blood pressure could have been higher or lower already before giving any medicine. There is no adequate control, that is the issue with *Ember*.”

Similarly, Heinemeyer and Ashby found problems with soil temperature readings, which are artificially high. “Their reported very high maximum soil temperatures were likely due to unintended heating of an exposed metal sensor by sunlight,” explains Heinemeyer. “Those sensors need to be covered by either soil or a shield to prevent artificial heating.”

In their conclusion, Ashby and Heinemeyer warn that since *Ember* is “the only published multi-site study to examine the effects of burning on multiple ecosystem processes... it is likely to have had a strong influence on environmental policy and land management decisions”. This is despite “a series of statistical inadequacies and what appear to be several important methodological flaws”.

Heinemeyer also takes issue with the report’s insistence that most peat bogs are degraded: “Bare peat, which is eroding, everybody can agree on is degraded. But actually when it comes to heather-dominated moorlands,



which can be very wet in the Pennines... why do you call them degraded?”

Burn patches on a moor south of the A628.
Photo: LB Garcia

Ember researchers complain that “key species are missing” from burn sites, including sphagnum moss. “How do we know how much of those key species was there before prescribed burning started?” asks Heinemeyer. “I think there’s a complete misinformation going on.”

Ecologist James Fenton has studied changes in landscape for many years. He disagrees with the assertion sphagnum moss is a staple of blanket bogs: “The Falkland Islands is one of the biggest, most peat covered of any country and there’s no sphagnum at all. It’s a myth that you need sphagnum to create blanket peat.”

The root of the myth and misinformation appears to be Richard Lindsay, a semi-retired researcher at the University of East London and senior research adviser for the IUCN UK Peatland Programme.

“The problem is the majority of our peatlands are already in a damaged state, as the IUCN UK Peatland Programme and indeed the government has acknowledged,” he said in 2020, quoting his own research to back up the claim. “Something like 80% of our peatlands are in poor condition already so they don’t have the dampness necessary to resist the impact of fire. So what we have

now is a damaged system that is just repeatedly damaged by the regularity of fire and it's only by breaking that cycle that we give the system time to redevelop the fire-resistant features that a really natural system has."

Lindsay was speaking in a video titled 'Does burning affect the mosses and can the mosses recover?' from a series Blake posted on her YouTube channel in December 2020. In each video she asks Lindsay questions like 'What is peat?' and 'Do managed burns reduce or increase the likelihood of wildfires?'

In a video called 'What is heather burning and why do people do it?' Lindsay makes this claim: "The issue really is that the upland heath community, if left to its own devices, will often develop a woodland community rather than a heather community. But because of the way we've managed it, it is maintained in a heather-dominated state and this is obviously what grouse are eating... But heather is not really a peatland species."

Heinemeyer disagrees with the claim: "Studies in the Pennines... indicate substantial heather cover in a lot of peat cores. So heather clearly forms peat. If the conditions are right,

anything will form peat. You will form peat, I would form peat, so does heather."

The Wildlife Trusts also recognises heather as a peat-forming plant: "Few plants are adapted to the acidic, infertile conditions found on the deepest peat and bog-mosses, heathers and cotton grasses predominate."

In an email to long-time moorland conservationist George Winn Darley, Lindsay deflects criticism of an animated video showing how a natural blanket bog should be: "The best example is Butterburn Flow in the Border Mires, which has a vegetation very similar to that illustrated in the animation because the animation emphasises that this is what a natural Sphagnum-rich bog would look like."

He then questions the value of Winn Darley's knowledge: "I accept that you have a lifetime's experience of working with moorlands, the fact is that this lifetime's experience will all have been associated with damaged blanket bog - because that is the current condition-state for pretty much all our blanket bog, as officially documented."

Where it is "officially documented" isn't clear, as studies Lindsay quotes



in interviews are often written by him. When contacted, he refused to answer questions about his research.

Heinemeyer points out the problem with Lindsay's Scottish or Border mire bog comparison argument: the ones in the Flow Country and Border mires are often valley bogs, the opposite of blanket bogs forming on hills. "Valley bogs get water all the time from the surrounding hills, that's why they tend to be always saturated and why their peat can be eight- to 10-metres deep." Richard Lindsay, he says, ignores that fact.

Cutting versus burning

Andreas Heinemeyer has been the only person to set about comparing the techniques in a proper scientific study, run by the University of York. Natural England supported Heinemeyer's study, knowing it is one of a kind.

While *Ember* largely ignored external, confounding factors, like rain and drainage, Heinemeyer's team carried out a before-after control-intervention (BACi) study to address the issue.

"We know hardly anything about cutting, but it's being pushed," he says.

Andreas Heinemeyer's team at one of the study plots. Photo: Andreas Heinemeyer

Roger France: memories of moor burning

"Somebody came [from Natural England] and wanted to see what we did about burning. So I took him near Snake Pass and up onto a bank.

I said, 'You can see all that hillside? That's the sort of burning we do. Tell me what's wrong with it'. 'It's a very steep bank. You burnt that?' I said, yes. 'We don't like that, it causes erosion'. I said, 'That's the fourth time I've burnt that hillside and it hasn't eroded yet'.

Then he's, 'Ah, well, if you've lit that at the bottom of the hill, aren't you frightened that it's going to race to the top, go right up and way out onto that 2,000 hectare mountain?' I said I don't burn it when the wind's going that way. 'What do you mean?'

I said, 'I have the wind coming off that top of that hill. I light the bottom of the hill and burn it on the updraft. It roars off up the hill and it looks extremely frightening. And as it gets to the top of the hill and the wind's coming other way, all flames go up in air and it often puts itself out, more or less'.

Somebody said I shouldn't have told him that. I said I should because we've got to show them that we're not a bunch of idiots, that we know what we're doing.

That's the mentality. National Trust couldn't burn those moors, controlled burning or not. [With cutting] the old heather flops down and it's all you've done. You're building a massive bonfire, you've provided even more fuel."



The kind of 'tinder' left after an area is cut. Photo: Andreas Heinemeyer



The people that are forming these policies are being misinformed

Steve Gibson

“So Natural England told Defra, we need a study on this because we don’t have the data and it needs to be long-term because nobody has monitored the entire management cycle. So let’s say 20 years, when you burn a plot up in the Pennines, you need to wait 20 years before you can burn it again because the heather grows slowly.

“Now we monitor after burning/cutting, the recovery time to when the heather would be ready again to be burned, which still is eight years away. We are already 13 years in (including planning), so we have done an awful lot and you see exactly what one would expect. You have a short-term impact from the burning, a bit torched but still lots of

moss. But after one year, that already goes and you get benefits from nutrient input from the ash. So the heather or the vegetation grows much better afterwards.

“Whereas with the mowing, it’s like a compost heap. So you just decompose the organic matter a little at a time, year after year... In most cases they leave it as a mulch and I think that will actually be beneficial on dry peatlands, shallow peatlands on the North York Moors, considering climate and the rest of it. You want to keep it wet, which is the best for insects as well, which is the stuff the chicks of grouse and other birds rely on. So cutting there might actually be much better as part of sort of a mosaic approach of management.”

It’s not unusual for Natural England to introduce questionable policies, an example being the ongoing General

Licence fiasco. In that case, we see a growing number of pest bird species added to the ‘protected’ list, baffling anyone who needs to go through the tedious application process. At the same time, the additions are applauded by lobbyists like Wild Justice, which claims to be protecting wildlife despite its actions having the opposite effect.

In the cutting versus burning or no management argument, Heinemeyer hasn’t finished his study, but all the signs are showing a conclusive result, one that goes in a different direction to the vision of Natural England and others.

He describes an ongoing project he is involved in, IDEAL UK FIRE, which is funded by the Natural Environment Research Council and involves a consortium of universities. Heinemeyer wanted to compare cut and burned moorland to an unmanaged site which lets things grow. With Howden Moor

in mind, the team approached its owner, the National Trust, but was told the organisation was not interested in collaborating. “It’s a government-funded research project on the issue of wildfire which affects the National Trust. I suspect they just don’t want to assess potential issues because they know already what the finding will be: unmanaged heather with shrub and tree growth will be much drier, it will be a huge biomass and it will come out in any model as a huge fire risk.”

Wildfire operations specialist Steve Gibson points out that the people with the greatest knowledge and experience are those given the least attention and in some cases are criticised for questioning the narrative promoted by Natural England and wildlife organisations. “They often don’t seem to listen to any advice that is contrary to their position,” he argues, adding that the *Peak District National Park Wildfire Risk Assessment* he was involved in was discredited by academics who had no wildfire experience.

Natural England produced two critiques of studies Gibson was involved in. *Quality Assurance of Peak District National Park Wildfire Management and Planning Document 2022* was a project of Alistair Crowle, one of Natural England’s more vocal opponents of controlled burning.

“National Trust and RSPB criticised the fact that it had been led by a land manager who basically wanted to look at a method of addressing the wildfire risk in the Peak District. Why should it not be led by land managers? They’re the people that are working on the land... They even criticised people who want to raise awareness of the risk... So the people that are forming these policies are being misinformed and don’t understand the consequences of the policies that they’re putting in place... I understand that there’s concerns about the use of fire and the indiscriminate use of fire, but to turn around and basically say you can’t burn is a little bit silly.”

Cutting on one of the study plots. Photo: Andreas Heinemeyer

Main photo: controlled burning at one of the plots monitored by Andreas Heinemeyer and his team from York University. Photo: Andreas Heinemeyer

There are several arguments for burning and against cutting, but few the other way round.

"If you cut, it can be worse than not doing anything," says Gibson, "because there's a significant difference between the combustibility of live fuel and dead fuel." He explains that cutting creates areas of dead fuel that rapidly reacts to the level of humidity in the air. When humidity is low, the dead fuel dries quickly. Live fuel is not so affected by humidity changes because it already contains moisture. So cutting creates areas of dry fuel and helps spread the fire, rather than contain it.

One criticism is the effect on microtopography ("all the humps and lumps and hollows") and habitats that exist beneath the heather. These can be indiscriminately destroyed, says gamekeeper Jim: "You are left with a bowling green because you're using big machinery. If we're wanting to create wet areas and encourage mosses and a diversity of plants, a bowling green isn't really the way to go. You want little areas holding moisture and water and drier areas."

Cutting also leaves two troublesome moorland features: bracken and ticks.

"We're restricted with spraying bracken now with the [banning] of Asulox [herbicide], which was the main chemical we used," says Jim. "Historically, the vegetation was managed by burning and there's more cutting now being done that leaves a thick layer of brash and that's going to create a really good breeding habitat for tick, [a] warm, moist layer. The danger from the tick [is from] Lyme disease affecting dog walkers and for all the other breeding wildlife that's up here. Mountain hares will get covered in ticks... chicks as well."

For the people looking after the land, burning offers many benefits, including recovery, says Jim: "As the heather grows, that becomes dominant and as

the canopy is removed, then you see all the other species start to come through again... We've got all of the plants coming back, different cotton grasses where it's been burned."

There are only really two issues with burning; that it damages peat and produces smoke. Claims about peat damage are easily proven wrong.

"The classic experiment with Geoff Eyre," says Richard Bailey, Peak District Moorland Group coordinator. "He would put a chocolate bar down in the moss layer, burn over it, it wasn't melted. Then the chocolate bar experiment became boring, so he went on [the moors] with fire service personnel and he was showing them principles of fire management, training them. He said, 'Right, come out for a day, you get paid £50'. So he put down £50 notes and said, 'I'm going to burn over your pay'. So he did that [and the] £50 notes are fine. He then moved on to mobile phones."

While smoke is generally not an issue, a combination of weather systems and topography allowed fumes from a controlled burn to linger over part of Sheffield in October 2023.

"The prevailing wind is from the west, so if you're going to burn, there's a chance that smoke's going to drop in Sheffield or Stocksbridge," says Gary, a Peak District land agent. "Our keepers are told in no uncertain terms, do your best to avoid this. We really want to burn on an easterly wind, but occasionally you get climatic conditions, particularly if it's quite still and there's a temperature inversion, maybe early afternoon. Suddenly the smoke will drop and then cloud or cold air will come down on top of it. So it'll sit in a valley. It'll sit in Sheffield."

The incident was used by the anti-burn lobby to reinforce its calls for a ban.

"On 9th October last year, smoke, ash and pollution engulfed Sheffield Hallam

constituency and beyond," complained Olivia Blake in Westminster in January 2024. "A great many people contacted me on that day and afterwards to complain about the air quality, which was four times over the legal limit on air pollution. It was a relatively still day, which meant the smoke took a while to dissipate and the unique topography of my constituency meant that constituents were very much affected."

Blake made lots of noise about how dangerous the smoke was. Lab tests showed her claims were false.

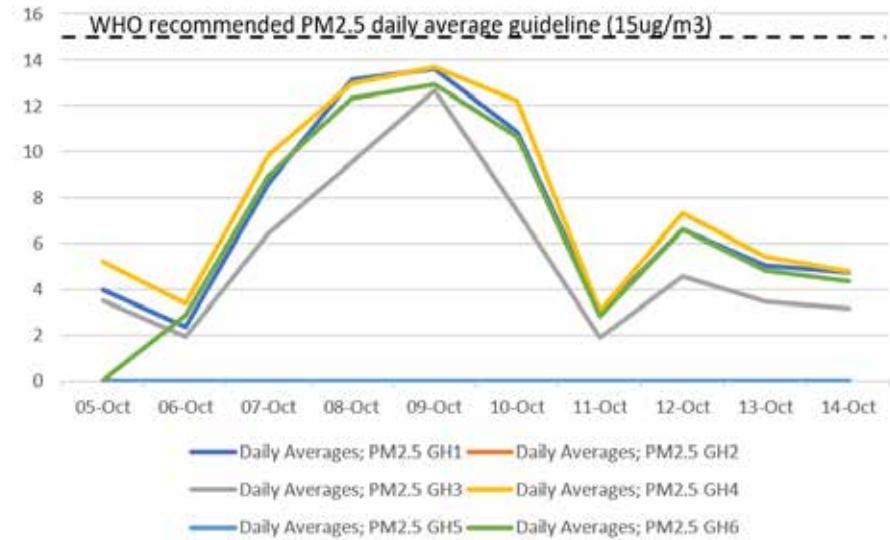
*A firefighter taking a photo of some £50 notes that survived a cool burn.
Photo: Geoff Eyre*



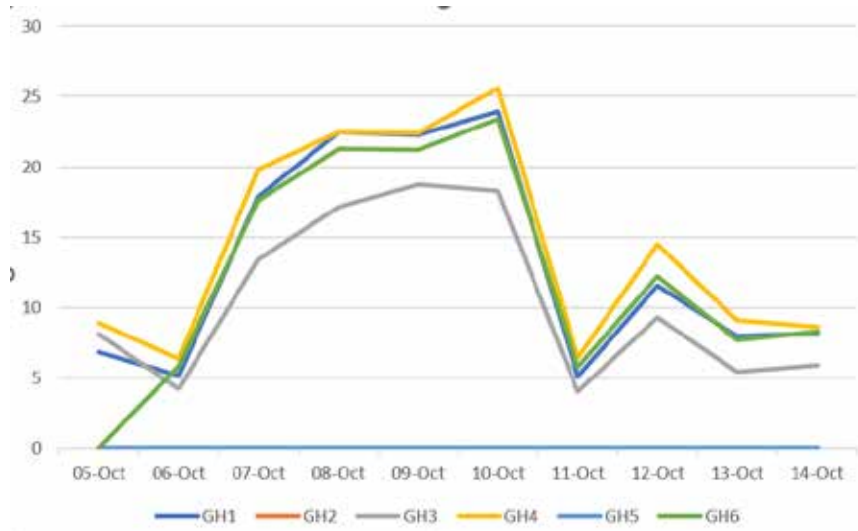
Map of the Sheffield area and nearby moorland, showing locations of air quality stations in the tables below and to the right. GH1=Fir Vale, GH3=Lowfield, GH4=The Wicker and GH6=Pond Hill (city centre)



Daily Averages Concentrations 2023; PM2.5 (ug/m3)						
	GH1	GH2	GH3	GH4	GH5	GH6
	GH1	GH2	GH3	GH4	GH5	GH6
05-Oct	3.964674		3.508011	5.195065		No Data
06-Oct	2.349833		1.926854	3.36648		2.861267
07-Oct	8.585615		6.432443	9.818617		8.925167
08-Oct	13.15468	Incomplete	9.521191	12.96194	Incomplete	12.33514
09-Oct	13.59152	data	12.6664	13.68712	data	12.92413
10-Oct	10.84971		7.407554	12.19314		10.63795
11-Oct	2.942782		1.874248	3.035958		2.801073
12-Oct	6.592065		4.539897	7.328833		6.589303
13-Oct	5.045109		3.454679	5.400022		4.814813
14-Oct	4.720906		3.167854	4.76649		4.355



Daily Averages concentrations 2023; PM10 (ug/m3)						
	GH1	GH2	GH3	GH4	GH5	GH6
05-Oct	6.788436		8.096991	8.855841		No Data
06-Oct	5.125063		4.2095	6.38243		5.817795
07-Oct	17.89225		13.39864	19.82059		17.60321
08-Oct	22.45551		17.12811	22.48718		21.24699
09-Oct	22.23156	No data	18.76638	22.42531	No data	21.20781
10-Oct	23.89579		18.27638	25.60268		23.37091
11-Oct	5.066156		3.99789	6.447803		5.774813
12-Oct	11.56687		9.298175	14.48234		12.19096
13-Oct	7.966575		5.414139	9.083271		7.664656
14-Oct	8.118744		5.900884	8.613025		8.315359



Figures supplied by Sheffield City Council show there were increases in pollutant concentrations PM2.5 and PM10 between the 7th and 10th October 2023 but they were all within legal

limits and in line with World Health Organisation guidelines.

“It caused us a nightmare,” Gary says, “but they’ve all lied about it.”



A wildfire warning sign and fire access track at the south edge of Bamford Moor.
Photo: LB Garcia



A gamekeeper holding some sphagnum moss.

The 'rewetting' fantasy

"Jim was doing it 40 years ago, I was doing it 30 years ago," says Richard Bailey. "Suddenly everybody else has caught up. But we've been doing it as an industry. At the time, we weren't rewetting it for wildfire mitigation... It was purely to create bog flushes [and] to increase the insects. But it's not new."

During a dawn walk on a moor near Glossop, Bailey and gamekeeper Jim explain the work they've been doing with sphagnum moss, which has become a catchphrase.

"Everybody's talking about sphagnum," says Bailey. "We are totally for getting more sphagnum on. There's this kind of drive at the moment. Wherever you do cutting for moorland restoration, you replant with sphagnum plugs. If you put sphagnum on dry peat, it will die, it will not grow."

Bailey warned against relying on impressive sphagnum-planting schemes being rolled out by wildlife groups and others: "There's a lot of

money wasted on projects which are doomed to failure before they've got off the ground."

In her November 2020 speech in Westminster Hall, Olivia Blake painted a devastating picture for lawmakers as she tried to argue for a ban on moorland burning: "Burning harms the sphagnum mosses, which hold water in the peatlands. As the mosses recover, grasses and heather replace and out-compete them, which means the water runs off down the hills, taking carbon from the peat with it, leading to this polluted water. Burnt bogs are consequently less able to slow water flow, which leads to heavier flooding after rainfall."

A little more than three years later, Blake made similar claims in another speech in London. Borrowing lines Richard Lindsay used in one of her videos, she went a step further, suggesting heather removal might be better: "There are some who say that we need burning to control fuel loads on the moors, that without burning, overgrown heather would cause wildfires. But the more you burn, the more heather grows and the more

you get locked into a cycle of burning. Isn't it better to break that cycle by restoring the moorland monoculture back to its former health, rewetting the peat and introducing a more vibrant biodiversity?" She goes on to suggest regenerative projects, such as planting sphagnum moss, which often means replanting 'plugs' that were grown elsewhere.

Blake and others insist that making the moors wetter with sphagnum will prevent wildfires, fix perceived problems with peat, and reduce flooding downhill. The idea it's a miracle cure for a host of issues is unrealistic.

"There's no doubt that it may offer some protection to the peat, which I think is one of the main objectives of Natural England," says Gibson. "But our suggestion would be it's not going to stop fire spread and there is a need to manage fuel loading within these areas as well."

"Rewetting will be great to get the sphagnum back," says ecologist Robin Pakeman. With regards to its ability to defend against wildfire he admits: "We don't know. They're basing their assumptions on wetter bog might not burn. It may restrict the growth of the heather, but we don't know how long it takes to switch from a kind of heather-dominated community to one where the sphagnum is having a significant influence. We have very little knowledge about bog restoration over the long term and blanket bogs still burn."

There are several recent examples of bog-burning wildfires. Pakeman points to a massive blaze in May 2023 southwest of Inverness, Scotland, which was so big it could be seen from space.

Peak District land manager Aaron adds fires at Hatfield Moors, east of Doncaster, which are managed by Natural England: "The water table is [not] far below the surface and they had a catastrophic wildfire on there.

Just because you rewet doesn't mean you're going to stop wildfire. It has no bearing on it at all."

Fires on Hatfield Moors cost South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service £300,000 in 2020. Local conservationist Helen Kirk told *Yorkshire Live* that Hatfield Moors was neglected: "The litter is horrific... disposable BBQs and all sorts. I've witnessed youths throwing cigarettes on the moors."

A spokesperson for Natural England said visitors should be more careful about extinguishing cigarettes and anything else that might start a fire. "Our ongoing water management of the peatland will also prevent the spread of fires across large areas of the site," they insisted.

West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service has this opinion about wetting moors: "Whilst permanent saturation can provide protection for underlying

Hatfield Moors near Doncaster has been plagued by fires. Photo: LB Garcia



Below and opposite: photos taken before Storm Babet in October 2023, showing the folly of 'rewetting'. Dams created to slow the flow of water were overflowing as the ground was saturated and could not hold excess water. The result was flooding downstream that caused hundreds of thousands of pounds of damage. Photos: Geoff Eyre



peat, evidence suggests that it can make little difference to surface fire behaviour and reduced protection to peat during extended periods of dry, warm, windy weather."

The promoters of wetting have a solution to that; keep the moors wet all the time. That has unintended consequences.

"[Natural England] have moved on to wanting it wetter," says Geoff Eyre of Howden Moor, site of much of his award-winning work. "Imagine you've got a vegetated gully, [they've] put a dam in [and] it floods like a canal. Then it kills all the vegetation and in summer it dries off. So there's all bare peat... They can hold water back in the winter and these little dams made pools just to slow the flow - well, supposed to. [In late 2023/early 2024] water that's come out of the sky has come straight off the moor because all these dams have been full. They did remark that millions they were spending on the work would stop flooding down in Derby. Well Derby got flooded, really

bad and it flooded the [Jaguar Land Rover] depot."

Although rewetting peatlands may improve resilience to wildfires under certain conditions, these sites are still potentially flammable, says farming consultant Charlie: "If it's wet, the surface vegetation, particularly in the springtime, can dry out pretty quickly. So the water table then might still be fairly high and I'll accept then that it's less likely to burn into the peat. But then you get a dry summer, such as 2018, or 1976. No matter what you've done in terms of raising water tables, the surface few inches will have dried out."

In April 2024, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) published a note titled *Wildfire risks to UK landscapes*. Andreas Heinemeyer, Steve Gibson and Richard Lindsay were among the contributors, as well as members of the RSPB, Natural England, Defra and the Wildlife and Countryside Link. A summary of the findings is distributed to every MP and relevant select committees.

The POST note refers to claims made by the IUCN UK Peatlands Programme that rewetting "could reduce the incidence, severity and carbon emissions of wildfires". Heinemeyer wrote to POST to complain about the generic claim, arguing it is "mis-selling [to politicians] something for which nobody has any generic evidence".

"Nobody has measured that," he says. According to Heinemeyer, the rewetting approach may work in some sites that can "naturally be very wet", which is not the case in the Peak District. "The issue is that many sites have a natural limit to their wetness and dry out in summer, whatever you might try."

The remote area of Howden that Eyre replanted with heather, the National Trust filled with sphagnum around 2015. "Sphagnum is good for grouse chicks and insects," says Eyre. "But they then decided to plant it in plugs onto cut Howden heather areas, rather



than damp prepared ground like I do, claiming they had a variety that would tolerate these drier sloping areas. I've grown sphagnum. I know where it grows. I've grown it from spores. I've watched it grow and then other plants grow out of it and smother it so it disappears.

"There were volunteers all over every yard [of the moor], planting sphagnum plugs. It cost an awful lot of money and we watched with interest. As time went on, the claims of large areas covered in sphagnum never materialised. Regardless of visible results or any follow up inspections over time, Natural England are still pushing private moors to plant sphagnum, just so they can get permission to cut [heather].

"As an agronomist, one studies crop results on each farm situation and the planting of sphagnum on Howden cuts [has been] a very expensive failure. From talking to many in a larger area, it's not the eureka claimed by climate change enthusiasts. [In December 2023] we walked it to [look for] the sphagnum plugs that they've put in. On the whole 6,000 acres of moorland,

[those we found] wouldn't fill this room. It's our taxpayers' money. You could have gone there with £100,000 in £20 notes and just thrown them up in the air... watch them blow away."

When landowners follow bad policies based on questionable science and don't address the fuel load issue, whose fault is it when there's a wildfire that spreads onto neighbouring farms and estates?

"I don't think Natural England are responsible for wildfire, but they're responsible for how we manage the vegetation," says land manager Aaron. He cites the case of the Howden Moor wildfire in 2015, where a National Trust vehicle was overturned trying to put it out. The trust "didn't have the wherewithal to get out there and effectively fight it". The blaze was eventually extinguished by neighbouring keepers. "Ultimately, I think the landowner is responsible because they have a duty under health and safety laws," he adds.

Geoff Eyre disagrees. "Natural England are in charge of the moors, full stop. So



There’s a lot of money wasted on projects which are doomed to failure
Richard Bailey

An extreme close-up of sphagnum moss. Photo: John Cavana

James Fenton on erosion and peat’s power to hold water

“If you cut a peat, you don’t see water draining out. It’s held in [where] capillary action is a stronger force than gravitational drainage. So water doesn’t drain out of peat. A blanket peat is one which has a perched water table. Because it holds water, as the peat gets thicker, the water table goes up with it.

Normally you have to dig down, into the soil, for the water table. In a blanket peat, because of capillary action, holding in the half-decomposed plant remains, the water table is quite near the surface because water doesn’t drain out by capillary action. Because it doesn’t drain out, it doesn’t drain in either. It’s like a solid block of concrete, in some respects, full of water.

So when you read that peats are good for flood control, it’s a load of twaddle. Water doesn’t run in and out of peat bog. The surface

whatever wildfire we get is their responsibility.”

“Because government authorities won’t sort the problem out, land managers have got no other place to go than the courts,” Gibson says. “They’ll basically say, ‘No, you can’t manage this because it’s a SSSI’ or because it’s 41cm deep peat, but there’s no consequence to that decision... But if you’ve got the evidence that the risk is this and if a fire occurs, the consequences will be this and the controlling authority turns around and says, ‘Well, we’re still not going to let you manage the fuels’, then surely any court would say there has to be a consequence to that decision. Natural England have to be held responsible because the risk was identified, there was no mitigation and basically the land manager has lost his livelihood because you didn’t allow him to manage the risk.”

layer (the acrotel) is where you get aerobic decomposition. If all the plant material decomposes before it gets down to the lower layer, peat won’t form.

You can’t raise water to an infinite height through capillary action. Eventually, gravity takes over. So if you’ve got a peat bog holding water by capillary action, it gets thicker and thicker, the water goes up with it and then there comes a maximum time when gravity takes over, the peat can’t get thicker, it’ll stop growing and might start eroding.

Peat’s very soft and in an erosion environment with a lot of rain and on hill slopes, is relatively unstable. So the greater the peat depth, the greater the probability of erosion.

You often read in Scotland that 85% of peatlands are degraded. That’s nonsense. That implies human damage. They’re not degraded, there’s erosion present. Erosion is a natural feature.”



Will nature groups farming and farmers ‘creating’ nature really improve the UK’s biodiversity?

Part two: Diversification

Farmers not farming

Harold Smith is a farmer in the northern Peak District. He lives around the area of uplands where the popular BBC television comedy series *Last of the Summer Wine* was filmed. He’s concerned about sheep disappearing from the moors. Besides many people enjoying seeing the animals dotted along hillsides, England’s rapidly-growing population needs feeding and the wool has many uses.

“We’ve got a vast area of uplands that’s not stocked,” Smith says, referring to the North York Moors and

the Pennine Ridge all the way up into Scotland.

Peter Atkin, whose farm is on the hills along Snake Pass, is just as worried about what the loss of sheep will mean for the future of farming. In his experience, sheep are being treated “as though they’re a skippable product”.

Wildlife groups grumble that overgrazing by sheep affects wildlife habitats and is destroying the countryside. There’s little evidence to support their claims. There’s also a myth sheep cause ticks. Conversely, they’re employed to ‘hoover up’ ticks,

Farmland in the northeast Peak District. Photo: LB Garcia



Peak District sheep.
Photo: LB Garcia

traditions of the land and its workers. Natural England, the National Trust and RSPB are among those organisations. Atkin has been farming sheep here for four decades, but now, he says, “They told me that there’ll be no sheep in five years.”

“They’re absolutely adamant that everything should be forested,” says land agent Gary. “They don’t seem to understand that a hefted flock on that moor lives its life out on the moors. Once your flock has lost that heft, you’re never going to recreate it.” He explains how there isn’t the labour available or the time, skills or young people prepared to go out with dogs day in, day out, pushing sheep back up onto the hill to acclimatise them. Like him, Atkin worries for the future: “What are we leaving behind us? What will there be left for any young person to come and take on?”

Instead, farmers are encouraged to forget about sheep and ‘diversify’. The RSPB and National Trust are responsible for pushing them into schemes that seem pointless and the results questionable.

A form of diversification being pushed is switching from sheep to cattle for

vegetation management. It’s not farming, says Charlie the consultant, which he defines as “where you are primarily involved in food production”. “There has been no incentive for food production since about 2005,” he adds.

Another choice is tree-planting, such as the Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme. This pays farmers “to provide environmental goods and services alongside food production”. Rather than something extra, it’s become the alternative for landowners who have realised it’s easier and cheaper than producing food and doesn’t affect subsidies.

“They’ve come out with these schemes [to] increase nature,” says Geoff Eyre. “But nobody’s been to see to me. I grew all these woods and I’ve been growing trees for years and hedges and things. They didn’t come to me to say, ‘Well how can you improve your nature on your farm?’ No, they didn’t. I can’t get paid for that wood, but if I want to put another wood in, I get well paid. Strange, isn’t it?”

“They want to destroy it all and the National Trust are responsible,” says Gary. “They want to turn everything into woodland pasture. It’s all a big experiment. It’s taken as being the sort of scientific engineering solution. It’s not, it is just somebody’s whim.”

Without their consultation, farmers feel their knowledge and expertise is ignored by big organisations with unspecified aims. “They never seem to clearly set out actually what they’re trying to achieve,” says Charlie. “I think it’s one of the big problems in terms of communicating with farmers: what does good look like? What is the actual outcome? It’s easy to say make space for nature but what species are you actually wanting?”

Tenant farmers who are unwilling to join green schemes because it will affect their business or have in other ways fallen foul of their landlords,

Harold Smith on the industrial devolution

“I just cannot see a future for farmers. We might not be too bad because we’ve got quite a large unit. But somebody on marginal land that hasn’t got a large area, I cannot see how they can continue in a farming business without going down the biodiversity net gain (BNG) path where they receive a lump sum of money for basically not doing a lot of farming but they’re tying the land up for 30 years. I don’t know how that works. I wouldn’t want to do it.

I’ve always been engaged to farm, not not farm, if you know what I mean. We take different payments because we have to have a business prop-up. Once you start to take the emphasis off farming and people get used to not using their hands to produce food, it’s going to be very difficult to be able to get people to come back into the industry to produce food.

We’ve seen this in every industry now, from miners, dockers, shipyard workers, collieries, steel production, car production. All the industries have gone. What are we going to produce in this country once farming’s no longer producing food? We aren’t going to have an industry in this country because agriculture will be the biggest industry going now in in this country.

But I do think it will come round full circle and they’ll think, ‘Oh hang on a minute, we need to be producing our own food’. Once that comes into their mind that that’s what they need to do, the farmers will have all gone.”

can find themselves paying a price for non-compliance, says Atkin: “They don’t [directly] increase the rent, they do it by taking land off you and planting it with trees or rewilding it and all this. So what they do is they reduce the actual workable acreage of the farm. Then they put it onto these schemes to draw the money, but, you know, reimburse them a bit more rent, as you might say. That’s the crafty way.”

Following our interview, Atkin started getting squeezed himself. After 40 years, the National Trust is kicking him off its land. He has the house and buildings but the 1,200-hectare moor is on a 10-year farm business tenancy that – at the time of writing – was about to expire. National Trust won’t renew the lease unless Atkin stops ‘inbye’ farming, which he has

Peter Atkin on Old House Farm in Derwent

“I put in for Old House Farm 40-odd years ago. I didn’t even get an interview. It was job done before [National Trust] even got the paperwork. This is one of the best farms in the north of England – a big, good, proper farm, old as well.

[The farmer] retired. National Trust had it empty for five or six years. They took all the environmental money and every grant and everything they could and stripped it off that land.

They decided they were going to relet it, advertised it and 20-odd young people went. They got them down to, I think it was half a dozen. At the request of the National Trust, they all had to submit a business plan on how they were going to farm it for so many years in the future,

furnishing them with ideas that they haven’t got themselves.

They’re spending about £12,000 for these business plans. [National Trust] claimed that nobody was suitable... then employed a young couple to manage it. [The couple] had sat with all the hierarchy of the national mistrust on the top table at a tenants meeting at the farm.

The reason they’d swap it over to a manager is because then they got control of all the finance that farm could provide. Basically they could rape it even better. They should be made by law to reimburse all those youngsters with the amount of money they wasted getting business plans and meeting the banks and everything else, because it was at their request, wasn’t it? Well, just thrown it in the bin.”

done for decades, and farms the way it wants. That means removing stock and planting scrub and trees. Since he won't, the trust is paying him to leave. It will then gain the entire holding and take it out of production. It plans to rewild the farm and allow scrub and trees to grow, or be planted, all paid for by the public.

"It is across their whole holding," says Peak District land agent Nick, of the National Trust policy. "Some tenants will be on board, others won't. They will be applying for a Landscape Recovery grant under Countryside Stewardship."

At the same time farmers are struggling to diversify, wildlife groups such as RSPB are having no problems getting Rural Payments Agency (RPA) farming grants, says Nick.

"They can claim all the environmental grants, originally intended for farmers, but now open to every man and his dog with land," he says, highlighting why a grant system designed to help farmers is broken. "Why are we, the tax payers, subsidising people buying up small areas of land for horses, lifestyle etc, with enough money of their own to build walls, erect fencing etc? They are taking land away from tenant farmers and getting paid to feed the birds."

A farm along the road from Buxton to Winnats Pass. Photo: LB Garcia

Curlews not crops

Ughill Farm, a couple of miles west of Sheffield, was bought by Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust (SRWT) in summer 2023 for £1.2 million. It raised £1.3 million in loans and donations from several foundations and trusts, including a £500,000 grant from FCC Communities Foundation, and cash from 550 supporters.

After putting in an offer it couldn't afford, an appeal video was released asking for donations to pay back the loans, so SRWT could "secure the future of Ughill Farm forever". In it, a narrator tells us the farm "is a sanctuary for upland wildlife" and SRWT wants "to save this precious place", which is "providing a feeding ground for curlew, golden plover and other nationally-threatened species".

On camera, SRWT CEO Liz Ballard says: "When Ughill Farm came up for sale we knew we had to act really swiftly because we wanted to protect this fantastic wildlife haven but also we needed to protect it from intensive farming because a lot of the land around here has been increasingly intensively farmed which means often we lose the habitat that's really great for breeding waders and we want to

We're not starting from a really poor, nature-deprived site

Liz Ballard, SRWT

ensure that the land is looked after for those birds into the future."

"Ughill Farm will help us demonstrate nature-friendly farming, that's what we hope to achieve here: farming and nature in careful balance," she continues. "It allows the trust to test and learn ways of farming in a nature-friendly way so that we can learn but it also allows us to think about how we can work with farmers in partnership. We need to be able to test and learn how farmers can both balance nature and farming and make a living."

Donors are likely to have been drawn by the promise to protect curlews and other special wildlife that was thriving on the 'intensively-farmed' land. However, some may have been surprised to hear Ballard admit the trust had no experience or concrete plan, but it will "test and learn" then "hope" nature benefits. When discussing Ughill Farm, 'test and



learn' is deliberately used often as pre-emptive damage control for cases when nature doesn't benefit.

A curlew keeping watch on a dry stone wall, while its partner looks after their chicks nearby.

Geoff Eyre points out that if a farmer fails when working under a grant, "they'll come and recover the money" - something that does not happen to wildlife organisations.

The Sheffield Star ran a story on Ughill Farm repeating the video's claims and emphasising that "time is running out to save a special wildlife haven". "Ughill Farm is one of the few surviving areas of marginal farmland where nature and agriculture live in harmony," it says, before this stark warning: "Sheffield & Rotherham Wildlife Trust fears that delicate balance could be thrown out of kilter and the land destroyed for good if it is used for more intensive farming, with overgrazing and damaging fertiliser and pesticides introduced to squeeze maximum profit out of the 132-hectare plot."

Most of the claims made by the SRWT crumble under scrutiny. The trust appears to have been banking on the bad image of farmers and farming painted by wildlife groups, such as itself, and politicians aligned with them.

This has rubbed off on the public, with a June 2024 survey by farming charity LEAF finding that 71% of British people



Ughill. Photo: LB Garcia

had no idea farmers did anything to help the environment or were responsible for about three-quarters of the countryside. A similar number didn't know farmers maintain hedges and woodlands or create habitats for wildlife and insects, including planting flowers.

Neither Ughill Farm nor wildlife living there appear threatened by anything. Nothing in the mix of moorland, woods, fields and valleys suggests the area is "increasingly intensively farmed", as Ballard insists. Nor is there public recognition from the SRWT of the hard work done by the farmer to create the "sanctuary for upland wildlife" in which the birds thrive.

SRWT was sent questions about the farm. Where was the evidence of intensive techniques used by the previous tenant or neighbouring farmers? Since the area was designated a SSSI under the previous farmer, how would nature-friendly farming improve it? What food will the farm produce to cover costs?

Media liaison James Hargreaves responded: "We're working on specific

reporting internally and with our partners, so I'll politely decline taking part in your research." He suggested checking the website for updates, but none of the questions was answered.

While the farm has been in the trust's hands for well over a year, its website has not been updated. A section called 'An Expert's View' explains how the farm was bought at just the right time to harvest ELMS payments from Defra. "Agriculture is entering a new era with a major transition in the way government financially supports the farming industry," says SRWT trustee and independent conservation advisor Chris Tomson. "Ughill gives the Trust an

opportunity to join this new era of farming [and] demonstrate to our members, decision makers and others that sound commercial, sustainable farming, together with enhancing our wildlife and natural resources is achievable."

Text under the heading 'Future Plans' is still vague and without vision. "We will be working with other local farmers in the area to test and learn nature-friendly farming practices," SRWT's project officer and adviser Martin Reed



He was more into horses than intensive farming

Geoff Eyre

told *Now Then* online magazine. "By working in agriculture we hope to learn from farmers and bring ecological expertise into the industry."

Cooperation may be tricky after SRWT accused its neighbours of farming so intensively it was a threat to nature and the only solution was buying the farm to create a wildlife sanctuary. According to Eyre, "SRWT wanted to get other farmers to join in for a landscape recovery project and they'd have nothing to do with it."

In one crucial way, local farmers and keepers will be helping the SRWT without being asked, by controlling the predators that prey on ground-nesting birds. Gamekeeper Jim explains what happens when things aren't kept under control: "If you're creating a really attractive habitat for these birds to come and attempt to nest in, but you're not addressing the predation issue, then essentially you're making a honey pot for these birds to come and attempt to breed in and fail."

Sharing a belief system with the National Trust and RSPB, SRWT is

unlikely to officially sanction predator control. Like those organisations, it won't complain when it benefits vicariously from neighbourhood pest patrols.

Jim points out that some authorities are realising it's necessary: "It can't be that controversial because the Eastern Moors Partnership, run by Sheffield City Council and the RSPB, are employing two people full time for six months of the year, running up to nesting and through to the summer, to do exactly what I do, day in, day out - fox control, carrion crows and magpies... They're obviously recognising that to try to achieve what grouse moors are achieving in terms of wader populations and Merlins and short-eared owls, they need to catch some of the predators that are going through and sweeping everything up."

Spending more than you can afford on a farm, just so you can 'test and learn' techniques that might not work, could be considered risky. In a meeting in July 2023, Liz Ballard acknowledged things might go wrong and admitted the 'intensive farming' by the previous owner had no effect on animal and plant life: "There is a lot of wildlife already on the site so we're not starting from a really poor, nature-deprived site. It's got quite a lot to offer so we need to be careful that we don't lose that."

A signpost in the centre of Ughill village, with 'intensively-farmed' land visible in the background. Photo: LB Garcia





Mountain hares

"The last three years or so, we've started doing the transect lines, counting hares at night," says Jim of the moor he keeps near Glossop. "I think the first year we did it, it was the highest numbers. There's been a slight decline the last couple of years, but the hare population does naturally rise and fall. It's still plenty. Again, they wouldn't be here if we weren't doing the fox control... There's a litter of fox cubs well off the moor, back into the grass fields and there are hen grouse feathers, mountain hare legs and lambs outside the hole. [Those foxes] are travelling maybe a mile and a half onto the moor to take that food back. They are going to come to where the food source is. It's a natural process."

Not everyone agrees the mountain hare population is stable, yet varies. A study of the Peak District's isolated population warned it is in decline and could disappear.

Quantitative spatial ecologist Carlos Bedson and a team from Manchester Metropolitan University estimated there were only 3,500 left in their 2021 paper: *Highest densities of mountain hares associated with ecologically restored bog but not grouse moorland management*.

"Our findings are deeply concerning," Bedson told the BBC. "Whilst there are a couple of places where mountain hares are abundant, most of the Peak District hills have very few hares remaining."

There are signs the report was created to fit an agenda. The BBC describes it as an "independent study" funded by the People's Trust for Endangered

**The hare population
does naturally rise
and fall
Jim, gamekeeper**

The notion that counting hares at night is 'better' misleads **Carlos Bedson**

Species (PTES). The trust is a member of the Wildlife and Countryside Link, along with the National Trust, RSPB, League Against Cruel Sports, Badger Trust, Rewilding Britain, Wild Justice and many more organisations with virtually identical agendas. The image they present to the public is they are anti-hunting, anti-shooting, anti-predator control, anti-burning, etc, many of the practices that have shaped the country's healthy and iconic uplands. If an unbiased and purely-scientific entity were to appear under the Link's umbrella, it would be anomalous.

In the BBC report, Bedson insists: "The highest mountain hare densities were in ecologically restored blanket bog, which has benefitted from investment in rewetting, where the natural flow of water is restored by blocking gullies and planting mosses and heather."

That is simply a case of going to where the food source is, according to Geoff Eyre. The research appears carefully timed. "They came out that there's more hares on where they've restored the moor than there is in the grouse moor," he recalls. "That was why everybody got uptight with it, because he was saying there's none on grouse moors... and we've got a higher density per square kilometre than anywhere on the grouse moors. But he was dead right in the fact that when Moors for the Future had done the work on bare peat and restored it, I found the same thing. You get little green shoots and hares do well on that."

But in another 10 years, when the little green shoots are fully grown, it'll be a different story, he adds, and hare numbers will go down on the restored peat.

Critics of Bedson say a more accurate estimate of the population might be achieved by driving around at night

and counting how many dead hares there are on the roads.

Jim explains that his team started transect counts to check Bedson's claims, which were based on camera traps and counting hares in the day time.

Responding to questions about his techniques, Bedson stood by his reliance on trail cams and thermal imaging for night counts: "Some folk assert there is something superior about counting by night (more hares are seen as they are nocturnal and active) than by day (fewer hares are seen). However the notion that counting hares at night is 'better' misleads as it is only one part of the picture. If one does not know the proportion of total hares seen at night, one cannot say it is a better method than surveying by day."

With no explanation, he insisted his survey included figures for hares that are "not seen", so "it does not then

*Mountain hares
on the Dark Peak
grouse moors. Photos:
RMBaileyMedia*



matter whether we survey by night or by day”.

Despite the report’s gloomy outlook, it was welcomed by some, including the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust. It pointed out the number Bedson came up with was similar to previous estimates dating back more than 20 years, proving the population is steady and not in decline.

Managing perceptions

Besides a lack of proper night counts, Carlos Bedson’s mountain hare research has two problems. Firstly, he completely ignored the influence of predators, only mentioning foxes when they triggered trail cams, giving him false readings. The other is his reliance on satellite imagery to identify areas of grouse moor as any one-hectare cell “showing a burn or mowed patch”.

When governments or companies cut budgets, one of the first things that goes is research. Instead, Google Earth and similar online tools are used as substitutes for onsite studies of land use, vegetation, soil types, wildlife and everything else. These ‘desktop surveys’ fail to account for many aspects, yet it seems they can be relied on for pitches for expensive projects or policy research, often funded by taxpayers.

There is speculation that Moors for the Future uses online maps in its research, land agent Gary says: “How on Earth could they have produced any sort of plans or budget or specification or whatever without walking over these moors for days and days on end, which would, as a matter of courtesy, require our consent. We would have noticed if they were there anyway, so they can’t have been on the ground. Nobody could have done a detailed survey.”

Rapid surveillance and shrinking local company and government representations are signs of how widespread the practice is. It’s now assumed people rely on checking areas with satellite imagery.

Now the National Trust appears to be faking fuel load management for the cameras in orbit, so when Natural England checks Google Earth, the heather levels at Howden Moor look “well cut”, according to Geoff Eyre. Only by standing on the moor would you realise it would not stop a fire. “But they look at it and they don’t believe me,” he says.

“Controlled burning squares helps reduce the fire gaining a large front, but cutting the squares leaves the brash that dries out, so will increase a wildfire front,” says Eyre. “National Trust and Natural England think they are firebreaks [because] burns and cuts make a very similar mosaic [but]

cuts will not work because they are not grazed, so often [there is] more dry dead grass. The best firebreak is a long burn along a gully in short rotation either side, but this is not allowed as Natural England stopped burning within 10 metres of any watercourse, so watercourses are now linked with burnable corridors like fingers that will help a wildfire increase in size.”

The illusion of fuel load management could benefit both parties, with Natural England satisfied work has been done to protect the moor from wildfires and National Trust able to deflect blame if any break out. It also raises questions about whether Bedson could ever be 100% sure what type of land he was looking at, regardless of the time of day.

Falsifying wildfire management in the Peak District could have devastating and deadly consequences. It’s also possible ‘created facts’ for a series of relatively small-scale incidents could distort an issue at the national level. As the manipulated information accumulates, the public’s perception of something identified as a threat could then be managed through ‘awareness’ campaigns and computer models predicting disaster if it isn’t stopped.

In this report we have two examples where unreliable and dismissed

We assume human pressures have caused the differences we see in biodiversity **National History Museum**

accounts have become facts; the decline in mountain hares that are actually thriving, and degraded peatlands that are eroding naturally. The architects of these disputed studies were not easily accessible. Richard Lindsay refused to discuss anything and it took more than three months of pestering to get Bedson’s bizarre justification for not counting hares at night. How many similar questionable and negative claims have been fed into the computers that calculate the UK’s biodiversity?

At the Natural History Museum, computer modelling by a team called PREDICTS has ranked the UK in the bottom 10 countries on its Biodiversity Intactness Index. There is a page on the museum’s website devoted to ‘assumptions and limitations’, which includes the lack of baseline measurements with which to compare the latest data.

PREDICTS team members refused on numerous occasions to respond to questions or reveal where the blanket bog data came from, insisting they “do not monitor the correct data”. Since IUCN data is included in the BII,



Richard Lindsay's flawed blanket bog research will almost certainly be there.

Contrary rankings exist, such as the one by Yale university that puts the UK joint 23rd (with Croatia) out of 180 in terms of maintaining biodiversity.

Nevertheless, claims by wildlife celebrities and organisations that the UK is 'one of the most nature-depleted countries' continue. At Action for Wildlife Day in August 2024, high-profile naturalist Chris Packham told people there that changing their lives could avert a climate catastrophe and save biodiversity, blaming the loss on farming and rural communities.

"The [RSPB's] *State of Nature* report published last year tells us that close to home, when it comes to biodiversity loss, we're in one of the worst places in the world. Not least because we're persecuting that nature. We're hunting those foxes and we are killing those hen harriers and gold eagles and goshawks and buzzards and everything else besides. Things are disappearing very quickly."

Chris Packham campaigning for imprisoned Just Stop Oil members at Action for Wildlife Day, 2024. Photo: LB Garcia



The *State of Nature* reports include information from groups that are part of the Wildlife and Countryside Link and are compiled by the RSPB. With the RSPB's policy of cherry-picking information that suits its agenda, the report is likely to include inaccuracies and exaggerations. Packham's speech also included examples of natural disasters that are not proven to be consequences of man-made climate change.

The 'nature-depleted' claim has been irritating farmers and land managers whose work is routinely overlooked and, as people on the ground, witness a wealth of wildlife most days, so notice increases and decreases far more accurately than computers and biased wildlife charities.

The farmers, gamekeepers and land managers interviewed for this report talk enthusiastically of the diverse wildlife they see on the land they manage – including barn owls, buzzards, brown hares and hobbies – with some species making a comeback for the first time in years.

Ecologist James Fenton believes there's a fundamental problem with celebrity conservationists and environmentalists, whose influence can be seen in policies and the public's perception.

"The Chris Packhams and George Monbiots of this world have no understanding of long-term vegetation change. Most conservationists, RSPB, National Trust even, don't have any understanding of long-term ecological dynamics. They don't understand how the systems they're managing evolved to what they were. You really need to be looking at the evolution of that landscape over thousands of years from an ecological perspective to understand what you've got. You shouldn't do any land management unless you can understand its ecological history."

Great crested newts!

In July, 2024, Defra posted this message on X (formerly Twitter): "Nature is dying. Today we begin to chart a new course. The new Government will urgently review the Environmental Improvement Plan for England, building out an ambitious programme to save nature."

A month earlier, RSPB CEO Beccy Speight issued a stark warning: "We've had recent research that shows if nature continues to decline at the rate it is doing now, which is really fast, then we could lose 12% of GDP in the next decade," she told *Channel 4 News*. "So, it underpins everything. Underpins the food we eat. It's our best ally in trying to address the climate crisis. You know, it's fundamental and we're just not seeing enough of it."

Speight was speaking a couple of months after it became law in the UK for developers to compensate for the estimated biodiversity lost and ensure a net gain (BNG) when building. Her organisation had been campaigning for rules and related public spending for years and the UK's low ranking in the Natural History Museum's global Biodiversity Intactness Index may have spurred on policy-making RSPB supporters to do their bit to recover lost national pride.

In written evidence submitted to a parliamentary committee in 2020, RSPB claimed private investment in BNG could top £1 billion a year and create thousands of jobs. Consultancies have sprung up across the country, as well as BNG teams in major companies, costing them tens of thousands of pounds.

"If you're a developer taking on a greenfield site, you would have to deliver the number of credits being destroyed by the development, plus a 10% surplus," explains Meredyth, who is involved in the BNG system. "In a lot of cases, the developer hasn't got the space to deliver that on their existing



site or on land adjoining that site, so they're looking effectively to farm out the responsibility onto another party."

Two of Geoff Eyre's homemade ponds. Photos: Geoff Eyre

While it might be designed for major building developers, there are repercussions in the countryside. According to Meredyth, the people with the money to get round it will, but it will end up affecting anyone delivering smaller schemes that it was never designed to catch. "Let's say someone wants to put in a farm track. That farm track might be four metres wide and 500 metres long. How many houses could you get in that footprint? Let's say 25. So that farmer is at risk of needing to pay the same for the same number of credits as a 25-house skin."

Rules vary from district to district. After the fiasco of the carbon market, where



Geoff Eyre's ponds.
Photos: Geoff Eyre

credits could be 'created' anywhere, like sacred tribal forests in Uganda, it was decided BNG credits must be produced closer to the development. That paved the way for farmers to get involved and local councils, adding an extra link in the chain and the potential for an entirely new fiasco.

"Some local authorities say you need to deliver more, some local authorities are saying you need to deliver the equivalent of what was there, plus 20%," says Meredyth of the BNG scheme.

A 30-year contract is drawn up between the developer and landowner. They are enticed by a £25,000 or so cash payment up front, which they will be taxed on later. Besides binding their land for 30 years, all liability the developer has is passed on to the farmer. Harold Smith – and many farmers – are unwilling to tie their land to such a long scheme: "You've got to be a very brave person to do that."

"A landowner is having to take on the complete unknown of what's going to happen over the next 30 years," says Meredyth. "Developers don't care because they'd rather pay what seems like more upfront, so they can draw a line under the project, know what their profit margin is, take their bonuses and bugged off. It was effectively meant to be a private scheme aimed

at the private sector, giving farmers, for example, and landowners an opportunity to diversify income. What is actually happening is local authorities and conservation charities are using it as a means of acquiring land or funding schemes."

What happens to properties that fail to create enough biodiversity? What happens if they create too much and are designated SSSI? Nobody knows exactly since each deal is a private negotiation and terms and conditions vary.

"There are people who are potentially running rings around farmers who aren't fully aware of the long-term implications and risk to their land," says Meredyth. "Because the biggest risk to many [is] there's no clear inheritance tax relief. So once you take the site out of agricultural management and it has a section 106* on it, with a conservation cover, are you exposing yourself to potential inheritance tax liability? Whereas if it was agricultural land, you'd be exempt**. The other question is, what are you allowed to do with the land at the end of the 30 years? Because you're likely to have created a habitat that under current policy would be protected."

(*Section 106 payments are fees or other obligations developers pay to a council in exchange for planning

permission. **Unclear after Labour's inheritance tax raid)

With farmers wary of BNG schemes, some of the consultancies approached from alternative angles. In June, Geoff Eyre received an email from a company called Wildscapes. "Have you got any areas where we can dig a pond for great crested newts?" he says, paraphrasing the message. "They will come and do it, look after it for 25 years and pay you something like £700."

"The district licensing scheme [applies to] a development site which sits within the proximity of a newt pond," says Meredyth. "It used to be that you had to retain and enhance that newt pond, but it was a bit of a nonsense because the newts weren't just there for the pond, they were there for the habitat that surrounded the pond. So eventually they came up with a policy called district licensing, which is if you had great crested newts near or on your site, you had to put funding into a pot that went to the local authority and the local authority would



Local authorities and conservation charities are using it as a means of acquiring land or funding schemes Meredyth, financial adviser

select a delivery group and they would go out, find landowners and farmers within that river catchment and deliver ponds for them. [In some areas] they pay for the pond to be dug, but they don't pay the landowners anything after. That's happening all over the country."

While it's offering farmers and landowners a few hundred pounds, Wildscapes is getting £15,500 from Natural England for every pond, each no bigger than 10 metres by 15 metres.

Eyre points out: "A man could dig one in a week by hand for £15,000, yet they won't let the farmers have the £15,000. I could dig a pond a day on the moorland [but] can't get that grant from Natural England."

That's because the local authority has not selected him for 'habitat delivery'.

Besides bulk emails, which include Natural England branding, Wildscapes also posts on Facebook. In November 2024, it wrote: "As a habitat delivery body for Natural England we're creating much needed ponds for great crested newts. Currently in our 5th season, we've created or restored over 320 ponds under this scheme already... There is no cost to the landowner – it's fully funded!" It ought to be, with the company raking in nearly a million pounds of taxpayer money a year, for basically digging ditches and filling them with water.

Ponds dug by
Wildscapes (SRWT)
near Holbrook Industrial
Estate, Sheffield.
Image: Google Maps



On its website, Wildscapes offers consultancy services to companies needing to invest in BNG credits. However, the company, which is owned by the Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust, is directly competing for the same funding and charging the clients consultation fees.

"The charities themselves are actually acquiring sites with a view to fund them with biodiversity net gain," says Meredyth. "If you're a landowner paying

the charity or consultancy to act on your behalf and let's say if there's a developer looking for a site, the inquiries are going to come through the wildlife charity. How do you know how those inquiries are prioritised?"

It's likely Wildscapes knows the funding is going to itself or a different firm in the same area and the company that hired it is wasting its time and money. There is no transparency.

"If it was any other industry, there would be competition and conflict," says Meredyth. "There'd be rules, there'd be policy, there'd be standards. It just seems that when someone's a charity and doing something for conservation, that immediately the assumption is they couldn't possibly be doing anything wrong."

If it was any other industry, there
would be competition and conflict
Meredyth, financial adviser

James Fenton on 'biodiversity'

"The word biodiversity is a disaster because everybody confuses biodiversity with diversity. You need to define very clearly what you mean by biodiversity. Most people use it to mean diversity. It's a very useful term at the global level for the full range of habitats and species across the world - rainforest in the tropics and tundra in the Arctic and boreal forests in Russia or temperate woodlands in Europe.

So it's maintaining the natural characteristics, what we've inherited from nature, things that humans didn't create, natural ecosystems. Some of the habitats across the world are not very rich in species, they're very undiverse. You walk for miles in Arctic tundra and it's always been boring

after the first thousand miles. The same with peat bogs on the Pennines. It's a bit tedious after the first 20 miles, it's all the same. It's not very diverse, but in terms of global biodiversity, that type of habitat is part of diversity of species on the planet. So to conserve global biodiversity, you've got to keep these areas undiverse.

If you have a moorland with, say 100 species of all animals, plants, whatever, [then] if you planted half of it with trees, you then have a woodland habitat with another 100 species. So taking the wider area, you increase the diversity from 100 to 200. So people say it's very good for biodiversity, but what you've done, you've reduced the extent of an internationally important habitat and reduced global biodiversity."

Is Natural England protecting the countryside with
green schemes and SSSIs, or just grabbing land?

Part three: Consolidation

National mistrust

In court cases involving Natural England trying to shut down shoots, for example, staff who give evidence are considered 'government experts'. The courts overlook facts that are likely to make these people unreliable witnesses, including that many lack experience or have been fed false or misleading information.

Natural England does not employ many 'experts' for specific areas its policies cover, relying on reports provided by third parties such as the RSPB, despite frequent criticism that its output is biased, inaccurate, or both. In cases where Natural England has

sought answers elsewhere, such as the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, lobby groups that support and even work with the RSPB have protested and threatened legal action.

The main lobby group, Wild Justice, sent moorland management and pest control into turmoil in 2019 after challenging Natural England's own laws for General Licences. This has forbidden the control of pest species Wild Justice insists should be protected. As a direct result, rare ground-nesting birds, for example, are in greater danger. The group's action makes it difficult for Wild Justice to argue it exists to get "a better deal for UK wildlife", as it claims on its website.

Wild Justice: Chris
Packham, Mark Avery
and Ruth Tingay at
Action for Wildlife Day
2024. Photo: LB Garcia





scrub, n: collective, stunted trees or shrubs, brushwood

“[The vegan Natural England ecologist] came here once,” says Geoff Eyre. “I took some scrub out of the hillside and he said, ‘At Natural England, we don’t like the idea of taking the scrub out’. I was getting [Defra’s Basic Payment Scheme], but they said they were going to deduct my payments because I’ve got scrub on.

So I said, ‘My payment’s deducted [because of the scrub], so I’ve got rid of this bit’. He said, ‘We don’t really like that’. I said, ‘That’s the government’s ruling. I don’t get paid because I’ve got scrub. So I’ve got rid of the scrub. I’m getting paid now. You’ve not come along and offered me any more money to keep scrub’.

He wrote me an email and said, ‘We don’t really like it but we prefer you to let it go back to trees and things like that’. He didn’t even ask my opinion. It was scrub. It was hawthorn scrub.

To be fair, if he had been civil with me, I would be quite prepared to have planted deciduous wood. I planted 10,000 trees up the valley without any subsidy this last two, three years. So, I’m not against trees.”

Natural England declares a similar mission to “help to protect and restore our natural world”. It’s unclear how much of what Natural England does fits its brief. In the General Licences case, its staff did not even understand the laws they’d created. How can that happen in a department that advises the government on essential policies that affect most of the country, such as those related to land management and farming?

Complaints about Natural England staff are common. A policy adviser for Defra, which sponsors Natural England, admitted that many staff lack the necessary experience to understand the issues they are dealing with and ignore facts or advice from moorland managers and farmers who have worked the land for decades.

“I think it’s fair,” he says. “A lot of Natural England staff, you know, are straight out of university, have never spent any time on [the moors]. Apart

from doing the specific study they might have done for their thesis, they haven’t really done much actual work on the ground. So, I think that’s a fair criticism. I think one of the things with Natural England is that they don’t pay particularly well and maybe it doesn’t attract the people that it needs to.”

After tasks are delegated to Natural England by Defra, then passed on to its regional offices, he argues that “It comes down to interpretation by the specific local area team staff, and that can be different depending on who it is... Sometimes the policy has good intentions, then it doesn’t quite work on the ground as it was intended.”

One of the local Natural England ecologists in the Peak District is a vegan member of a socialist punk band that has played benefit gigs for animal rights extremists and hunt saboteurs. Their decisions affect anyone in their area applying for

licences to hold shoots on their own land.

Meanwhile, a reserve manager has been caught on camera taking ‘dates’ to picnic on private property and view nesting birds of prey, according to local keepers. These are not fresh graduates, but long-term employees. They have the power to approve or deny bird releases. Their decisions have gained them a reputation for being unwilling to compromise.

“I had dealings with [Natural England land management and conservation adviser] Richard Pollitt,” says Roger France. “[He] never, ever compromised on anything. There was no middle ground. There’s an estate near Meltham over there, and they rung [the owner] up, saying Natural England would have to come and speak to him [about a new policy]. He said, ‘If it’s Richard Pollitt, I’m not talking to him’. After a bit of discussion, the chap said, ‘Are you saying you won’t talk to

Strines Reservoir seen from Sugworth Road.
Photo: LB Garcia

Dry stone walls are an English icon, yet building and maintaining them is a dying craft.
Photo: LB Garcia



Natural England or you won't talk to Richard Pollitt?' He said, 'I won't talk to Richard Pollitt'. So the man who went to meet them is two steps higher up the ladder than Richard Pollitt and they came to an agreement straight away. I had this theory for a while; was all this stuff we'd been told Natural England's policy or Richard Pollitt's policy? I suspect that the National Trust is similar."

The National Trust's Craig Best is one of the leaders in the movement to purge sheep from moors. According to people at meetings, he appears to genuinely believe he is doing farmers 'a favour' by forcing them to get rid of their livestock. Best has also boasted about the large amount of money available for schemes - £5 million for one, £35 million for another.

"'Oh, we've got millions of pounds coming in'," recalls land manager Aaron, "'This is how we're going to spend it' he continues. When [somebody] asked him how much, he said, 'Oh, I'm not very good with numbers' and things like that. Then the chairman moved things on."

Questions about where the money comes from aren't answered and his claims have been removed from the minutes of meetings. While money is still pouring in to the countryside, the outflow of farmers, farm workers, gamekeepers and others continues. Those behind the replacement exercise are failing to maintain a workforce with knowledge and expertise passed down over the years that ensure smooth management of the land.

"They're dying skills, you know, farming properly, dry stone walling, proper gamekeeping," Gary complains. "Knowing how to burn properly and safely, knowing how to work sheep and dogs on the hill, it's all going fast."

Peter Atkin says the brain drain "affects your shop, your village, your post office, your pub, everything". "The

Peter Atkin: tradesman's exit

"The National Trust [had] proper, quality tradesmen - the best... a team of men of their own. They disbanded them," says Peter Atkin. "There's now 40-odd [workers] here. They've all got to be paid, haven't they? And they're all doing less. They're just letting the whole area go to wrack and ruin... There's either three or four of them I would give benefit of doubt and say, 'Yeah, you come and work with us'.

"I've got my lads come in this yard here, 7:00 in the morning. Their lot go into the yard just up road here. They're lucky if they get there before 8:30-9, sitting till 10:00-half past, go out, do a

bit, have their dinner. They're back down road at 3:30. They don't even pull the weight.

"[National Trust is] spending money as if it goes out of fashion. They're buying these bloody machines at £100,000-odd a piece that nobody else can afford to run... There were a tractor on there. When they bought it, it would be about £60,000-odd. From 2008 till now, it's just got over 1,000 hours on the clock. Work that one out...

"They got them like a quad bike track thing, they're about £130,000... They parked it at front of the [Marsden] fire and it went up in flames."

biggest thing it does," he adds, "is all them [young people] were going to be the custodians and the guardians of the countryside in the future and they're not there. The skills have gone."

Some landowners now stipulate in sales contracts that their land is never to be associated with the National Trust. Whether that's possible is irrelevant, as it's more an indication how intensely disliked the organisation is. It hasn't always been this way, nor has Natural England.

"When I was dealing with them in the late 1980s and start of the 90s, the people from Natural England on the ground were reasonable," Gary recalls. "You saw the same person each time, you got to know them and there was a considerable amount of mutual respect. In about 1996, it just went downhill until James Cross became chief executive of Natural England. He was great and I actually got him out on-site. He made it very clear to the three or four Natural England people who come up with him that they would toe the line. He could see they weren't being reasonable with me and my clients. We really thought in the brief time he was there, he was there to make things better. Suddenly, he lost his job, literally overnight. No idea why, he just went. Since then, they just got worse and worse.

"[Natural England's] scientists are often people who have got PhDs by the time they're 23. They're what we call desktop conservationists. They haven't got a clue. They tend to be highly politically motivated [and] jump around from job to job between Natural England, National Trust, RSPB, the National Park authorities, Wildlife Trusts. They're ruining the countryside... They're determined that sheep are the enemy, heather is the enemy. They're absolutely adamant that everything should be forested."

Rhododendrons and other species planted on the moor at Howden that was previously restored to heather by Geoff Eyre.
Photo Geoff Eyre





A lot of Natural England staff... haven't really done much work on the ground Defra policy adviser

Empty plastic and metal tree guards on a SSSI moor near Haweswater in the Lake District, 10 years after they were planted.

Photo: LB Garcia

In these instances, he says, the habitats for which the SPA, SSSI and SAC designations were made, are lost.

"We had somebody [visit] the other day," says Eyre. "He'd been paid to find out why farmers can't get on with Natural England and all that. I just said, 'Well, why do we need Natural England? I manage without them'."

Scheming

In March 2024, a report was published that found schemes run by the RSPB on United Utilities (UU) land around Haweswater in the Lake District failed so badly they created an environmental disaster. Despite the findings, the achievements of the partnership won the 2024 Ashden award for 'Nature based solutions (UK)':

On the awards website, Ashden claims the area was "a badly damaged landscape", specifically "peatland vegetation", with "hillsides nibbled bare by livestock" that "raised flood risks". It says RSPB and UU 'rewiggled' a river, cut grazing animal numbers to help plant life and took other measures to produce cleaner water and prevent flooding.

In reality, the March report – by this writer – found much of the flooding was caused by UU's insistence on keeping Haweswater reservoir full all

year for aesthetic reasons, allowing no room for excess water when snow melted. Cutting grazing and lax fuel load management mean heather is growing to heights that considerably increase wildfire risks on the 'restored' peatland. After a failed tree-planting scheme, tens of thousands of plastic and metal tree guards have been abandoned, littering the landscape, including SSSI moorland. Metal frames are rusty and overgrown with grass or lying in streams, while the plastic has dissolved and is now in the local river system. Almost none of the 100,000 or so trees survived.

"Sheffield Corporation, National Trust, say they formed a partnership between them," says Peter Atkin. "Basically, the partnership is that they'll be drawing money off them for something. You can rest assured, [but] we can never find out how much they're actually taking out of these schemes."

"That money that [National Trust/RSPB] receive isn't going back into making the land better," says farmer Harold Smith. "It's going into paying their top executives a lot of money, plus vehicles, accommodation and going to all these different seminars and meetings or someone else's expenses... They don't have the threat [as farmers on schemes do] of an inspection and saying, 'You've done that wrong, we're taking 50% of your money'."

The Haweswater tree-planting scheme reportedly cost £3 million. A £5 million scheme, called Life in the Ravines, will see double the amount of trees planted in the Peak District Dales around Buxton, Bakewell and Matlock. It's led by Natural England but £3.6 million comes from the EU Life programme, the rest from Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, National Trust and the Chatsworth Estate.

Haweswater in the Lake District. Photo: LB Garcia





Trees felled in Lathkill Dale by Natural England then piled up to create a barrier. Photo: LB Garcia

It's being sold as restoring woodlands affected by ash dieback. The climax of the five-year project will involve experimental drones planting trees in hard-to-reach spots on steep ravine slopes. The drone launches were highlighted in news stories when the scheme was announced, but coverage dried up since. The launches are scheduled for 2025 "pending the outcome of procurement processes, feasibility assessments and permissions", according to Life in the Ravines project manager Becky Plunkett, listing three things that should probably have been done before telling the media.

Some locals are concerned areas that haven't been seriously affected by ash dieback are being replanted with non-native species. "We still don't know the full impacts of ash dieback," says David, a land manager. "What they've done is taken out all the ash trees on five different reserves and planted small-leaf lime. They've got no evidence small-leaf lime ever

grew [there]... They're just thinking it might have done. How do they know they're going to where there's ash dieback? They talked about Natural England being swallowed up by the Environment Agency not long ago and I think ash dieback has saved it because they've got so much money from it."

Before the project started, Natural England spent a few years and public money planting some of the areas with ash - the same trees that have been cut down to make way for small-leaf lime.

"The team follow a strict protocol when deciding which trees need to be removed," insists Plunkett. "Following best practice, ash trees are only felled where: large stems are hazardous and posing an immediate risk to the work site; small stems are infected with ADB (unless they are the only stem providing the desired level of canopy cover); medium stems are infected with ADB (ash dieback) or

poor specimens (priority is given to choosing the poorest and smallest of specimens)."

On visits to the area in 2024 and 2025, it appeared that whole slopes had been cleared of ash rather than selective thinning, compared with a visit to the same area in 2021.

"Our methodology is to create between 40% and 70% plantable area for new trees within each 0.25 hectare coupe," said Plunkett, responding to the observation. "In all areas we would be aiming to retain ash, unless it fits the criteria."

Plunkett defended the planting of small-leaf lime: "Small-leaved lime would have been a foundation species of the Special Area of Conservation and is still present in variable amounts across the area. They tend to be in more isolated pockets as the more accessible woodland areas are the most changed by human activity."

Across the area covered by Life in the Ravines, locals complain that Natural England's 'human activity' is destroying reserves. Felled trees are left to rot in the once picturesque dales or causing flooding after being dumped in rivers. Some complain fish have disappeared from Lathkill Dale, a limestone river that has inexplicably become full of mud.

A sign explains trees affected by ash dieback have "been left as naturally as possible, whole and in situ where they have been felled, to mimic fallen trees". But rarely is it convincing, with piles of trunks and branches everywhere. These features of the project are designed to "maintain as much biodiversity value as possible", the sign says.

Besides small leaf lime, the mishmash of new species includes firs and holly. Throughout the dale, tree guards are empty or contain dead trees. Some don't have root bulbs, while others wait to be swept away after being planted in areas clearly affected by recent flooding.

Lathkill Dale manager Joe Alsop said the stacking of trees was unrelated to the project and due to an "obligation to manage trees from a safety perspective".

When projects like Life in the Ravines are presented for tender, some wildlife groups come up with remedy schemes for the perceived problems very quickly. Rarely are researchers spotted on site preparing their plans, opting instead for remote surveillance. Some applicants appear to have spent more time than available to them - far more than individuals or landowners are allotted.

"The timelines for applying would suggest that the NGOs would have to have done all the work before," says Aaron. "I suspect that there's collusion between the government body and the NGOs as to what these schemes are going to be. The timeline for



One of the empty tree guards at Lathkill Dale.
Photo: LB Garcia

applying is so short that I can't see any other way of it happening."

Land agent Gary has a different theory: "Equally possible, is they just pick things out of thin air and think, 'Oh, we'll say that. That's a million here, a million there'. I just don't think there's very much thought or integrity involved."

One of the companies restoring parts of the Peak District is Moors for the Future (MFF), a quango of the Peak District National Park, National Trust, RSPB, Environment Agency and water companies.

"I haven't had them on my land," says Aaron. "We've been applying [to the park authority] for infrastructure which you need planning consent for, to put tracks in or build ponds so that you've got water on site. On the other hand, you've got MFF frittering millions and millions of pounds away. They do similar work, but at vast cost to the taxpayer."

Natural England consults MFF to calculate the cost of restoration projects, then recommends landowners use the quango to do the work.

"Essentially they're writing their own cheques," says Aaron. "I decided, along with others, to do the work myself, which was quite a financial undertaking because you have to pay the contractors up front before you can claim the money back from Natural England. Whereas MFF just charge Natural England directly. I've done it at two-thirds of the budget Natural England put together... I think it was about a £100,000, whereas I know others who've used MFF [and it] used the whole lot. Funny that. MFF also charge a 12% management fee."

One reason some schemes don't appear to have a positive impact is they are not meant to. Meredyth, who works in the biodiversity and carbon credit finance system alongside the RSPB, says many 'partnerships' between corporations and wildlife groups are public relations exercises.

"They come together and create something called a facilitation fund," she says. "They'll get funding from say, a water company. 'We're going to go into this catchment, we're going to get a load of landowners on

board, and we're going to set up a conservation scheme, and you, the water company, are going to pay us, and we'll help paint a pretty picture that you're helping to reduce nutrients and pesticides getting into the watercourse'."

The brief fits the Haweswater scenario. Coverage of the conservation schemes - plus the Ashden award - will have helped improve the image of UU, tarnished by scandals about the water company releasing a vast amount of sewage into England's rivers.

"They're all about credibility through association," says Meredyth. "So a wildlife group finds an area, they'll find a high population of wood pigeons, for example, then set up this swanky marketing ploy, 'Operation Wood Pigeon'. Then they go out and engage landowners on the premise that they're providing free, independent advice. The next thing you know, on their website, they're talking about how they're actively managing X-thousand acres, which is not the case. They've just met a farmer and the farmer let them do a morning's bird count. They then use that story to go and, you know, raise money off of Leonardo DiCaprio."

As the Haweswater schemes prove, winning or losing doesn't matter in the PR game. It's likely similar schemes are run in the Peak District, involving some of the same organisations. One thing Meredyth is certain about is the RSPB is not interested in low-budget deals, even in cases where the results could be positive.

"A private ecology firm [told RPSB], 'There's real value in engaging smaller landowners because they're going to be people that can help connect these key habitat features in the landscape'. And the RSPB effectively said, 'We're not interested. They don't really have the money behind them to benefit us'. So it wasn't really about conservation."

The SSSI kiss of death

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) are thought by many to be examples of the best England can offer in terms of natural wonders. According to Natural England, achieving 'favourable condition' on all its SSSIs is one of its main objectives. "Favourable condition means that the SSSI's habitats and features are in a healthy state and are being conserved by appropriate management," it says.

While it may immediately be clear what this means to anyone in the department, outside its walls, the definition of 'favourable condition' is the topic of debates. A Natural England employee was sent to Geoff Eyre's moor in the Peak District to see which bits are favourable and which not. At the time, 'rewet' areas appeared favourable.

"Anybody who goes up [on your moor], they should show you what is perfect, if this is what we're aiming for," he says. "My moor, I was aiming for what they want to see and I've achieved it. What they wanted to see 20-something years ago, the Biodiversity Action Plan, we had that, Natura 2000, we had ESA, all these were wanting to see all these species and I thought, OK, and I've grown them. Yet now it's changed. They don't want heather anymore, they want it wet. But then you can't wet somewhere that's on the hillside. If you add it up in the Peak District, it will come to [less than 1% where] you can rewet and grow sphagnum and grow all these things.

SSSI designation basically comes down to backdoor nationalisation David, land manager

The bilberry bumblebees

"This is a few years ago now," says Geoff Eyre. "They planted 70 bilberry plants in cages at Foxhouse. They said they're trying to save the bilberry bumblebee. They've given them £1 million over the years. The lady that took the job, she didn't know about bees. To me, for £1 million, you'd employ a bee person to breed them, wouldn't you?"

"There's plenty of bilberry. I've got loads of bilberry bumblebees on my moor, but nobody's giving me any money for them. But where's that money gone? Where's it gone? Are there many more bilberry bumblebees? All they seem to do is have bumblebee outfits and go to schools and talk about bumblebees dressed up as them.

"They got the television crew there [while] planting these bilberries. They're going to protect them from the mountain hares. They planted [some] among this deep heather and they got

smothered. I drove there the other day and the hills are just covered in bilberries."

"It's the most costly, disastrous waste of time you can possibly imagine," adds Gary, the land agent. "[Wildlife groups] don't even claim that they can necessarily get successful breeding numbers [on this type of project]. They're just saying, we need to adapt the habitat to help them. So they want all these millions of pounds and they're not even saying that they'll actually achieve anything.

"Then the next thing they'll say is, 'Well, we've got the habitat, but we haven't got the [wildlife]. We want another round of £10,000,000'. It's just a never-ending begging bowl."





A grouse on a heather moor. Opposite: uncut heather on one of the plots used in the cutting versus burning study. Photo: Andreas Heinemeyer

“The point is, [MFF has] done a lot of the work, which has been quite good. They’ve restored the bare peat, which I showed them how to do, they’ve run out of the areas yet the money’s still coming in. So instead of it being like when we were doing it, £1,000 a hectare, they’ve only got 10 hectare and a million quid. So suddenly it becomes £30,000 a hectare and then it’s £44,000 a hectare because they’ve got to show where it’s going to be spent. Somebody will investigate them someday. They’ll go through it.”

With ‘favourable condition’ constantly changing and Natural England replacing reliable and established land management techniques with contemporary experiments that achieve questionable results, the SSSI designation has become meaningless. It’s increasingly clear that the rating is the equivalent of a crosshair.

Covers: a gamekeeper putting out summer wildfires in the Goyt Valley (front) and Saddleworth Moor (back). Photos: RMBaileyMedia

“They are anti-shooting, but they won’t come out and say it,” says retired gamekeeper Roger France. “They’re not going to turn around and say, ‘You can’t shoot’, but they have clipped things so that you can’t make it viable, so you give it up yourself. ‘Well, we told

them they could shoot’, they’ll say. I think it’s just a load of flannel.”

“Of course, it wouldn’t be a SSSI if the shoot wasn’t there,” says David, who says Natural England shut down a shoot on a SSSI near Buxton so it could buy the land. “They wasn’t stopping you doing it. It was making it impossible for you to do. Get rid of the shoot. It’s not worth anything to anyone else. They’re the only people that can buy it and to be fair, that’s exactly what they did. Once it’s SSSI, you no longer own it.”

A farmer in the same area was next: “Him and his family farmed there for 100 or more years,” recalls David. “They made his land SSSI, then came to him one day and said, ‘You can’t have that many sheep on there... it’s SSSI and we want the numbers of sheep reducing’. They’re not even a big farm. And he said, ‘You made it a SSSI with me farming it and now you tell me I can’t put sheep on my own ground?’ But they’ve got the power to do that. SSSI designation basically comes down to backdoor nationalisation, quietly stealing the land.”

It’s no wonder then, that members of parliament are trying to take the power to designate SSSIs away from Natural England, angering celebrity environmentalists like Guy Shrubsole, who believe the designation is still relevant and Natural England serves a purpose. He’s demanding tighter restrictions on what landowners are allowed to do on their own property to meet a vague United Nations target of 30% of England “protected” by 2030. Seventy-percent is already managed by farmers and gamekeepers, who conserve the wildlife, create the habitats and uphold the picture-perfect image the rest of the world has of England’s countryside.

“I think the National Park are hell bent on getting rid of private landowners,” says land manager Aaron. “They’re all deluded in the fact that it was designated as a national park because of the way it looked and it looked that

way because it was farmed and all the trees had been chopped down 5,000 years ago or whatever. Then it had been grazed with sheep ever since. It’s been designated SSSI because of the way it’s been managed. They’re just trying to destroy that.”

“It came basically through the late [head of Natural England] Martin Doughty,” says Eyre. “That’s how it all got about. He said at this big meeting [in 2005] I went to, because they gave me an award for the work I’d done. He stood in front of all his people and said, ‘We’ve got plenty of money from Europe. If [the owners] won’t do as we tell them, we will manage the moors and take it off them’. That was his attitude. I think all the people he employed have got it in their head that it should be nationalised. Moors for the Future was created at the same time... to take over managing the moors when they were nationalised – after they stopped grouse shooting. I was on the board and the first thing they said was, ‘Why do we need grouse shooting?’”

Bandwagons

“In the old days, farmers were given money to cut down hedges, now you give them money to put them back,” says James Fenton. “In the old days, farmers were given money to dig ditches in bogs, they give them money to put them back. In the old days, people were given money to plant trees on peat bogs. Now they’re given money to take them off. I mean, that’s how the rural economy functions. It’s all determined by grants on financial incentives. There’s no strategic overview of what we want the land to look like and how it all works together. It’s purely leaping onto bandwagons and then jumping on the next one when the next one comes along, and then 50 years down the line saying, ‘Oh, I wish we hadn’t done that.’”



