

Community Land Scotland Position Paper on 'Rewilding'

February 2022

This paper sets out Community Land Scotland's position on 'rewilding'. It does so within the global context of the related climate emergency and biodiversity crisis, together with the specific Scottish context of land reform and community wealth building.

The Scottish Government's Environmental Strategy articulates a vision that, by 2045, by restoring nature and ending Scotland's contribution to climate change, Scotland is transformed for the better – helping to secure the wellbeing of Scotland's people and planet for generations to come¹.

Community Land Scotland strongly supports that vision. We view land reform - defined as measures that modify or change the arrangements governing the possession and use of land in the public interest² - as crucial to its realisation. We contend that diversifying Scotland's unusually concentrated pattern of rural land ownership to facilitate more community ownership of land is a pre-requisite for ensuring that both the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis are addressed in economically, environmentally, socially and culturally sustainable ways in accordance with the principles of community wealth building³. We further contend that Scotland's unusually concentrated pattern of rural land ownership, in which just over 400 private owners (0.008% of the population) have been estimated to own 50% of privately owned rural land⁴, has historically contributed to biodiversity loss in Scotland.

Community landowners are in the business of helping make the places where they live sustainable, both now and for future generations. They do that by providing local employment, business opportunities, affordable housing and a range of community services and amenities. Reversing biodiversity loss, whilst contributing to a just transition to a net zero carbon economy represent vital components of that process of community-driven sustainable place-making. Community Land Scotland is therefore highly supportive of biodiversity restoration as a means of sustaining both the natural environment of our rural and urban places and the communities who live there. We also recognise and welcome that these community-generated benefits contribute to Scotland's overall sustainability and to the sustainability of the planet as a whole.

Community Land Scotland recognises that 'rewilding' is used as shorthand for a wide range of activities and processes that can be classified under the general rubric of biodiversity rebuilding and restoration. We do not consider the term 'rewilding' to be constructive insofar as it promulgates the myth of 'wild' rural landscapes, historically untouched or unoccupied by human communities, in ways that undermine the legitimate place of human communities in these landscapes. However, we are supportive of the term's underlying principles insofar as they make mutually reinforcing links between communities' economic, social, environmental and cultural sustainability and wider public benefits associated with biodiversity restoration.

¹ Scottish Government. (2020) The Environment Strategy for Scotland: vision and outcomes.

² Land Reform Review Group. (2014). The Land of Scotland and the Common Good. Page 16.

³ The Centre for Local Economic Strategies describes community wealth building as "a new people-centred approach to local economic development, which redirects wealth back into the local economy, and places control and benefits into the hands of local people".

⁴ Combe, M.M., Glass, J., and Tindley, A. (eds). (2020) Land Reform in Scotland: History, Law and Policy.





Community Land Scotland's position on 'rewilding' is also informed by the following considerations, all of which relate closely to the above.

Firstly, we are strongly of the view that 'rewilding' initiatives should complement the policy objective of re-peopling areas of rural Scotland rather than subverting it, and vice versa.

Secondly, financial and related economic benefits arising from 'rewilding' initiatives should be retained by communities living within places generating such benefits, rather than being extracted from these communities, in accordance with the principles of community wealth building.

Thirdly, communities' voices should be to the fore in shaping the parameters of 'rewilding' initiatives within their localities, ideally facilitated through community ownership of land.

In summary, Community Land Scotland recognises and strongly supports the pressing need for action to address both the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis. We are equally clear that such action must be undertaken within the interlinked policy contexts of rural repopulation, community wealth building and community empowerment, with land reform as a cross-cutting policy theme to help achieve communities' sustainable development in practice. We therefore continue to be concerned over the use of the term 'rewilding' insofar as it precludes recognition of communities' legitimate place in landscapes and acts as a barrier to their economic, social, cultural and environmental sustainability. It is therefore vital that biodiversity restoration initiatives are undertaken in ways that are compatible with and supportive of the regeneration and renewal of rural and urban communities in relation to all four pillars of sustainable development.

Community Land Scotland will continue to advocate for community-led action on the climate emergency and biodiversity loss, as evidenced by rural and urban community landowners in Scotland⁵, in ways which support the sustainable development of individual communities and of Scotland as a whole.

⁵ The Institute for Heritage and Sustainable Human Development. (2021). 'Community Landowners and the Climate Emergency.'

