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Wild land, land use, resource control, land reform: Thoughts from 1984

James Hunter

Introduction

The paper reproduced here was written 42 years ago. I was then an Aberdeenshire-based freelance journalist and broadcaster specialising in rural and environmental issues. And I'd been invited to become an early trustee of the just-founded John Muir Trust (JMT). There was much discussion among trustees as to what JMT should be about. Safeguarding 'wilderness' or, as it would be called today 'wild land', was a key priority. I shared that objective. But I thought it could be attained in ways that also helped people living around wild land areas. What I wanted, I guess, was a means of bridging the gulf that had opened up (and remains evident today) between environmentalist aims on one side and, on the other, the aspirations of rural communities in the Highlands and Islands. Hence my 1984 paper.

This paper was sent to me some two years ago by Denis Mollison, one of JMT's founders, who (unlike me) had kept a copy. Until that point, I'd forgotten about it. This may seem strange. But if (as I've done) you've written many hundreds of articles and compiled lots of papers for a whole variety of purposes over several decades, you're inclined (in my case anyway) to find some of them slipping from your memory. And so it was with my 1984 contribution to JMT debates. Many of the ideas I outlined in 1984 were elaborated subsequently – not least in light of the close contact I'd have, in various capacities, from the mid-1980s onwards, with people on the ground. Here everything's left as first written – though I'll afterwards touch on the extent to which the situation I described has, or hasn't, changed for the better.

JOHN MUIR TRUST.

WILDERNESS WITH PEOPLE: CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS.

James Hunter, 14 May 1984

"When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. The nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no centre any longer and the sacred tree is dead."- Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux.

"Lord and Lady Stafford [the future Duke and Duchess of Sutherland] were pleased humanely to order a new arrangement of this Country. That the interior should be possessed by Cheviot Shepherds [meaning sheep farmers] and the people brought down to the coast and placed there in lotts [or crofts] under the size of three arable acres, sufficient for the maintenance of an industrious family, but pinched enough to cause them turn their attention to the fishing. I presume to say that the proprietors humanely ordered this arrangement, because it surely was a most benevolent action to put these barbarous hordes into a position where they could better associate together, apply to industry, educate their children, and advance in civilisation." - Patrick Sellar, Sutherland, 24 May 1815.

"On the third evening, when returning to Inverie, the factor came upon a small boathouse erected on the shore at Doune, which they [the evicting party] had overlooked. In this the ejected families had huddled at night for two nights, not daring to put up any artificial shelter. Fire was immediately applied to the roof and the structure burned down. This completed the work of destruction and eleven families were left absolutely without shelter, for unfortunately for them the coast of Knoydart has no caves in which protection from at least the rain might be found." – Scotsman, 22 October, 1853.

Combining conservation with development begins with the realisation that policy-makers operate under legitimate pressures besides those associated with nature conservation; pressures arising, for instance, from economic and social problems so acute as to make their immediate mitigation seem more important than the long-term safeguarding of the natural environment.

A Third World finance minister - confronted with mounting indebtedness, massive poverty and, very possibly, imminent famine - cannot afford the luxury of the longer view. If there is a market for timber from his nation's rainforests, he will sell that timber irrespective of the ecologically damaging consequences of so doing. And the Third World peasant will welcome the resulting employment and income, however insignificant his share of the total proceeds. That is an inevitable human reaction; just as a Highlander - living in a community where jobs are few, wages low and career prospects

extremely limited - is unlikely to turn down the chance of comparatively well paid employment in a platform yard or a petrochemical plant just because some visiting conservationist tells him that such a development will detract from the Highlands' wilderness quality.

It may be objected that there are alternative strategies available; strategies which will assist both the peasant and the rainforest, both the Highlander and the hills. Indeed there are. And this paper will come to them in due course. But that more positive side of the conservation message has not been presented adequately to the wider public - in the Highlands at least. From the Highland perspective, as a result, conservation is associated almost entirely with obstructionism; with opposition to this dam here, that ski development there, that quarry somewhere else.

Such a state of affairs is not peculiar to the Highlands. "Conservation and development", comment the authors of the *World Conservation Strategy*, "have so seldom been combined that they often appear incompatible. Conservationists themselves have helped ... to foster this misconception. Too often they have allowed themselves to be seen as resisting all development ... The result has been not to stop development, but to persuade many development practitioners ... that conservation is not merely irrelevant, it is harmful and antisocial."

The case of the Highlands conforms closely to that position. Here we have a locality fashionably described as “Europe's Last Wilderness"; a place so splendid and so precious, it is sometimes implied, as to justify resisting, circumscribing, perhaps even preventing, all development within its boundaries. But here, too, we have a seriously underprivileged region where socially deprived and depopulated rural communities are also said to require that self-same development in order to promote their material betterment and - especially in the case of the Hebrides - safeguard their distinctive language and culture.

Those opposing perspectives are not new. They were evident in the debate surrounding the Highland hydro-electric programme in the 1940s and 1950s, for example. But ever since the public inquiry into a projected platform fabrication yard at Drumbuie in Wester Ross in the early 1970s, hostility between the development and conservation camps has grown steadily - not least as a result of environmentalist opposition to Cairngorm ski development and environmentalist criticism of the EEC-funded Integrated Development Programme (IDP) in the Western Isles. Now, however, the very intensity of these conflicts has produced at least some degree of wider reflection on the part of the participants. In the conservation movement there are indications of an overdue realisation that the animosity engendered by the movement's apparently negative stance with regard to development will serve to discredit the entire environmentalist case in the Highlands. Among those involved in the formulation and execution of development policy, on the other hand, there are clear signs of an opposite anxiety: that all prospect of Highland development will be jeopardised by an ever more influential environmentalist lobby thought to be intent on preventing any significant change in Northern Scotland.

In this subtly altered climate of opinion it would be particularly appropriate, I believe, for the John Muir Trust to raise the prospect of another way forward; one that envisages neither the victory nor defeat of one side or the other; but one which attempts instead to evolve a Highland development strategy that satisfies the aspirations of the local population while simultaneously safeguarding one of Europe's more outstanding natural environments.

It may seem, to say the least, a little naive to imagine that there can be some sort of mutually beneficial alliance between the conservation movement and those Highland communities with which so many conservation groups have been at loggerheads. But that is not necessarily the case; for there are emerging in the Highlands, as in other parts of rural Europe, pressures for change of a kind that is very much in accord with the conservationist outlook. In Shetland, the Western Isles and elsewhere there is considerable emphasis on the revitalisation of indigenous culture; there are growing demands for development to be locally based, for people to have a greater say in their own affairs, for communities to have more control of their own resources. All this is entirely in line with conservation principle and provides a possible basis for more mutual understanding between Highlanders and the environmentalist movement in the rest of Britain.

Such a rapprochement demands, on the conservationist side, a wider appreciation of the fact that the Highland landscape does not exist independently of the people who live in it. To the visiting southerner, an empty glen is simply part of "Europe's Last Wilderness". To the Highlander, the same glen is a perpetual reminder of what has gone before: the dispossessions, the expulsions, the enforced liquidation of community and culture in the manner indicated by the quotations at the start of this paper.

Some thirty years ago, that point was well made by Hugh MacLennan, one of Canada's greatest modern novelists. MacLennan, now in his seventies, was born in Glace Bay, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. His great-grandfather was an early nineteenth-century emigrant from Kintail. His mother was one of Cape Breton's many Gaelic-speakers. And so Hugh MacLennan, on first visiting the Highlands in the 1950s, felt it appropriate to give to the essay which arose from that experience the title *Scotchman's Return*.

Northern Scotland's wide open spaces, MacLennan observed, certainly resemble those of the Canadian Arctic. "But this Highland emptiness," he continued, "only a few hundred miles above the massed population of England, is a far different thing from the emptiness of our own North West Territories. Above the 60th parallel in Canada you feel that nobody but God has ever been there before you. But in a deserted Highland glen you feel that everyone who ever mattered is dead and gone.".

As Black Elk said of other deserted valleys far away, a people's dream died there. And by exulting in the resulting emptiness, the modern conservationist displays a quite astonishing insensitivity; an insensitivity that extends to many other aspects of the Highland situation, present as well as past.

The type of approach I have in mind is well illustrated by a 1982 *New Scientist* article concerned with the threat allegedly posed to island birds by the Western Isles IDP. Taking issue with the Common Market categorisation of the Western Isles as a "less favoured area", that article begins: "For tourists who come to gaze on the rough windswept coasts and feel themselves a million miles from the hassles of the twentieth century, the islands with their wild scenery and mild climate are anything but ill favoured."

That may be true. But the Western Isles also have to contend with one of Scotland's highest unemployment rates and some of Scotland's worst housing. As far as islanders themselves are concerned, therefore, the "hassles of the twentieth century" are all too real and pressing. They do not take kindly to external criticism of projects designed to enhance their economic prospects. Nor do they respond favourably to people who appear to set a higher value on island birdlife than on the maintenance of a human culture which is arguably much more endangered.

This is difficult territory. If you are, for instance, a Gaelic poet whose language is spoken now by only 80,000 people, how do you convey to someone who is secure in his or her membership of an English-speaking community numbering several hundred million, the terrible sense of desolation and despair engendered by your role as custodian of a culture poised on the very verge of extinction?

Let me try to construct an analogy, however imperfect, from the world of conservation. All of us experience occasionally that peculiar sense of oneness with nature which is to be found in places special to ourselves. It may be on a mountainside, on an open coast, in a pine forest or an oak wood. You will know, in your different ways, what I have in mind. Let us suppose, for sake of argument, that it is a piece of natural forest for which you have this affinity; a place where tree has followed tree, generation after generation, since the end of the last Ice Age. Let us further suppose that you encounter someone setting about that wood with chainsaws and bulldozers. How you feel about that assault on those ancient trees is how a minority culture reacts to a threat to its language; except that, in the case of language, the sense of violation is much greater. Trees, after all, are external to ourselves and, for the moment at least, there will be other woods to visit. Language, in contrast, is intrinsic to our personality; it is one of the most basic things about us; and it is quite unique and irreplaceable.

Should the corncrake ever vanish from the Western Isles, something precious will have been lost. But should the Gaelic language be extinguished in its last Hebridean strongholds, something else of value will have been abstracted from the earth. And conservationists should be as concerned about the one as about the other. They should, in short, be elaborating a vision of a Highland future in which community and culture are every bit as important as landscape, scenery and wildlife.

That would demand, on the environmentalist side, some reassessment of what exactly it is in the Highlands that ought to be conserved. Let us make clear, for a start, that - as the returned Cape Bretoner Hugh MacLennan pointed out - Highland Scotland ought not to be seen in the same light as

Arctic Canada or, for that matter, Amazonian Brazil. This is not now the sort of place where nobody but God has been here before us.

Two thousand years ago almost all of Northern Scotland was tree covered. The red deer, now a lean and rangy beast of the open moor and hill, was then a forest animal, its numbers held in check by wolves. Eagles and buzzards ranged across great woods that stretched from the Atlantic to the North Sea and out of which the high hills protruded like islands in a dark green ocean. Bears rummaged among the trees. Wild boar churned up the underbrush. And the country's few human inhabitants still went in awe of a natural world which they, unlike their more recent successors, were quite unable to dominate and control. Then the Highlands were indeed a wilderness. Now they are a wasteland; their bare hills and empty glens a consequence of human mismanagement, human greed and human cruelty. Nature can flourish here, as it can flourish on a bomb site or on a motorway embankment. But to describe the Highlands as "unspoiled", as is done by many conservationists, is to abuse both language and history.

The Highlands are most certainly replete with lonely places. The landscape is both stark and grand. But that landscape is also the product of a prolonged process of environmental degradation, a good deal of it deliberate. The great forests were removed by man. The treeless moors and hills which resulted, and which are typical of the modern Highland scene, were then subjected to further deterioration and erosion through overgrazing and repeated burning. To appreciate the extent of the ecological damage which has been done it is only necessary to chart the stock-carrying capacity of a given tract of land over the last 200 years. Where that capacity can be assessed, it will be found to have fallen massively. That fall has been paralleled, of course, by a reduction in the human population; a reduction effected, in many instances, by methods whose brutality and ruthlessness is indicated by the quotations at the start of this paper.

This, of course, was the essential message of the late Frank Fraser Darling who did so much to ensure that conservation and ecology are among the dominant concerts of our time and whose early career was concerned almost exclusively with North West Scotland. In that neglected masterpiece, *West Highland Survey*, Fraser Darling's preface, written in 1954, ends with this sentence: "And finally the bald unpalatable fact is emphasized that the Highlands and Islands are largely a devastated terrain and that any policy which ignores this fact cannot hope to achieve rehabilitation."

For conservationists concerned with the Highlands in the 1980s, as much as in the 1950s, that is an excellent motto; as is this longer passage from the Survey's section on land use: "The Highlands as a geologic and physiographic region are unable to withstand deforestation and maintain productiveness and fertility. Their history has been one of steadily accelerating deforestation until the great mass of the forests was gone, and thereafter of forms of land usage which prevented regeneration of tree growth and reduced the land to the crude values and expressions of its solid geological composition. In short, the Highlands are a devastated countryside, and that is the plain primary reason why there are now few people and why there is a constant economic problem.

Devastation has not quite reached its uttermost lengths, but it is quite certain that present trends in land use will lead to it, and the country will then be rather less productive than Baffin Land. It is possible that the wilderness value of the West Highlands for the jaded townsman will still be sufficient to justify a large subsidy to maintain a sufficient population of people following practices of misuse to prevent any natural healing of the devastation. *But if the jaded townsman attains to an ecological knowledge and appreciation he will not necessarily wish his wilderness to be the desolation caused through devastation of land by his own species* ... Man-made devastation is no environment for physiological health in a people as a whole."

That is an appropriate starting point for a conservationist approach to Highland development; an approach which, in my opinion, ought to be influenced by that breadth of outlook which ensured that, in Fraser Darling's account of Highland circumstances, the skills of the natural scientist were allied to a strong sense of history and a profound appreciation of the cultural achievement of Scots Gaeldom.

Taking as its starting point the wider objectives of the *World Conservation Strategy*, such a conservationist policy for Highland development would be designed to manage Highland resources in such a way as to ensure that they yield the greatest possible sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining their potential to meet the needs of future generations.

Resources, in this context, would be understood to include land, the farming and forestry potential of that land, together with fisheries and those landscape and other attributes which are the basis of Northern Scotland's value both as a wildlife habitat and a place of leisure and recreation.

These resources, as already indicated, have been exploited previously in ways which have benefited neither the Highland environment nor the Highland population. Fish stocks have been depleted. The land has been degraded. Management methods have been both ecologically and economically extractive. The pattern of exploitation has been such as to cause a major deterioration in the natural resource, while simultaneously ensuring that the economic proceeds of resource exploitation have, for the most part, accrued to external interests rather than the locally resident population.

The depopulated state of much of the Highland countryside is thus a consequence of the mismanagement of the region's resources. A conservationist strategy for Highland development, therefore, would aim to bring about a substantial measure of repopulation.
Such a strategy would seek to achieve that repopulation by fostering the utilisation of locally available resources, by local people, for local purposes; the most stable, most successful and most productive type of rural development being that which is resource-based and both managed and controlled from within local communities.

In this context, it is appropriate to quote from a speech made by the Secretary of State for Scotland Mr George Younger at the 1983 annual conference of Rural Forum, an alliance of organisations

representing people living in the Scottish countryside. "The overriding objective", said Mr Younger on that occasion, "must be to harness the creative energy and skills of people in local communities so that they will be able to maintain and enhance the life of those communities. What matters most is the encouragement of confidence in individuals and communities in their ability to tackle their own problems in a practical way and to exploit their resources both human and material."

A conservationist strategy for Highland development would broadly endorse those views. It is important to stress, however, that such development will not occur of itself. Especially in more deprived and run-down Highland communities, the confidence mentioned by Mr Younger is in short supply. Protracted depopulation - not unconnected with resource mismanagement - has resulted in widespread acceptance of the inevitability of continued decline. Countering the consequent sense of apathy and demoralisation is a necessary prelude to unleashing the skills and energies which Highland people undoubtedly possess. A conservationist approach to Highland development, therefore, would incorporate measures designed to restore individual and collective self-confidence.

These measures would be educational and cultural as well as economic. To revitalise a Highland, and more especially a Hebridean, community's faith in its own abilities, it is necessary to restore a proper pride in Gaelic language and culture - policies which contribute to the undermining of that culture being as much to be deplored as policies which result in the degradation of the natural environment. For that reason, a conservationist strategy for Highland development would support and seek to expand those measures already adopted in the Western Isles and elsewhere to regenerate the Gaelic language.

Because of its wider emphasis on the need to foster locally based development and promote greater local control of resource management, such a strategy would also advocate a much more decentralised form of administration in the Highland area - with a wide range of decision-making and revenue-raising powers being transferred to island groups and comparably sized mainland localities.

As a first step in that direction, a conservationist strategy for Highland development would strongly support Highlands and Islands local authorities and fishermen's organisations in their campaign for a locally run fisheries management structure - with licensing arrangements guaranteeing preferential treatment for local boats.

Local control of fisheries ought to be followed by the establishment of similar control with regard to land use - the ultimate aim being community land management on Alpine lines.

The present government's disposal of state assets offers an ideal opportunity for local experiment of this kind. The privatisation of Forestry Commission plantations, and the anticipated privatisation of the Department of Agriculture's crofting estates, might be handled in such a way that the ownership of at least some part of the land involved is transferred to communities residing on that land.

To reinforce its overall aim of strengthening local communities and local economies, a conservationist strategy for Highland development would re-order the priorities governing grant aid and related aspects of existing development policy. Thus small-scale, resource-based and locally-controlled enterprises would be preferred to large, externally managed plants of the kind which have failed so disastrously in the past.

The general need to promote greater local participation in the development process is illustrated by the particular case of fish-farming. Although fish-farming provides an increasing amount of employment in the Highlands, the industry is largely in the hands of major companies. Local communities have consequently been denied valuable entrepreneurial opportunities and the local economy has been deprived of direct access to the badly needed investment capital which the industry will eventually generate.

In fish-farming, tourism and every other area of economic activity, therefore, a conservationist strategy for Highland development would discriminate actively in favour of the locality; preferring to assist a community co-operative or a local hotelier rather than a multinational corporation; believing that a business which is locally owned and locally run is likely to prove more beneficial and more durable than one which is the remote outlier of some larger concern.

By promoting the local interest in this way, a conservationist strategy for development would also assist the emergence of managerial practices geared to maintaining and sustaining renewable resources. Thus an island community which controlled its own fisheries would have a vested interest in enforcing effective stock conservation policies of the kind now applied in waters around Iceland, Faroe and other places where that type of local control has already been established.

Because the land resource has suffered much more degradation than its marine equivalent, it confronts a conservationist strategy for Highland development with particular problems. Revitalising the land would not be easy; and it would require, within the generally applied principle of enhanced local control, a fairly drastic overhaul of the financial and other incentives available to agricultural and forestry interests. These are clearly matters for much detailed debate and discussion. But some basic guidelines can be laid down.

Local experiments in community ownership, of the kind mentioned above, should be accompanied by a much wider degree of community involvement in decision-making regarding land use.

A land use code - incorporating measures designed to enhance fertility, foster reafforestation and safeguard nature conservation - should be applied to all of Northern Scotland. The code should insist on a general reduction in red deer numbers and its implementation should be accompanied by upland agricultural support reforms which would favour cattle husbandry at the expense of sheep.

There should be a much greater degree of integration between forestry and farming, with forestry

and related timber processing industries being increasingly the responsibility of local interests rather than government agencies or large private corporations; the aim being to replicate in Northern Scotland the common Continental pattern of woodland management.

Future reafforestation should also break with past and present reliance on exotic softwoods. Planting should include substantial stands of indigenous species such as oak, ash, hazel, birch and scots pine - thus assisting the re-emergence of at least some features of the original Highland landscape.

There should be some revival of land settlement along the lines of those settlement schemes which were implemented successfully in the first thirty years of this century.

In selected areas of high conservation value, notably the Cairngorms, the principle of local control should be applied as elsewhere; but in recognition of the national and international interest in these areas, management bodies should include representation of those wider interests and management plans should give pride of place to nature conservation.

None of the foregoing is intended to be definitive. Much of it may seem unattainable - though I do not believe it necessarily to be so. For the moment, however, this paper is put to the John Muir Trust only as a basis for, and a personal contribution to, discussion as to how the Trust might define its conservationist objectives in ways which will also promote, and be seen to promote, the interests of people living in the Highlands.

When compiling his *West Highland Survey* in the 1940s, Frank Fraser Darling wrote: "The greatest value the mass of Highland land could give the nation would be as a continuing wild land in which perhaps twice as many people could live than there are at present." That, I think, should continue to be the conservationist objective. What we have to devise are the means of attaining it.

Fraser Darling also wrote then: "There are three bodies in Scotland which should be able to work in close co-operation and rid their minds of narrowly pragmatic notions. The Department of Agriculture has great power and owns half a million acres; the Forestry Commission also has power, plantations and land; the Nature Conservancy has little land as yet but may be expected to develop ideas and techniques in conservation and the ecology of land use."

But there Fraser Darling was overoptimistic. These organisations, and other more recently created public bodies, have proved unable or unwilling to promote the changes he had in mind. And so we must look elsewhere for the means of achieving more enlightened policies. One source of potential advance, as already stressed, is to be found in those Highlands and Islands communities which are themselves reasserting their distinctive identities and pressing claims to greater control of their own destinies. The other possible source of progress, this paper has argued, is the conservation movement. Unlike the various official agencies, voluntary conservation bodies have the capacity to formulate those imaginative and wide-ranging policies for which Frank Fraser Darling called in vain.

And as its support and influence grows among the population at large, the conservation movement also has the capacity to bring those policies to the attention of government in an ever more forceful and effective manner.

It is commonly remarked in Northern Scotland that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) now has more members than there are people in the Highlands and Islands. That state of affairs is thought, by most Highlanders, to be decidedly unfortunate; for it is widely assumed in the Highlands that the overwhelming majority of those RSPB members, like conservationists generally, will in some way be opposed to Highland interests.

But why should that be the case? This paper's theme is that there is no inherent reason why the conservation movement and the Highland population should not have a great deal in common; no reason why Northern Scotland cannot accommodate both nature conservation and a flourishing human community; no reason, in short, why the Highlands should not be, as the title of this paper suggests, a wilderness with people.

Explanatory Notes

Black Elk or *Heȟáka Sápa* (c.1863-1950) was one of the Oglala Lakota people who, in turn, were a part of the wider Sioux confederation. As a youth or young man, he witnessed both the Battle of the Little Big Horn (1876), a Sioux victory over US forces, and the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890). At Wounded Knee in South Dakota, to which Black Elk refers here, some 300 Lakota men, women and children were killed by the US military.

Patrick Sellar (1780-1850) was a Sutherland Estate factor. He's here looking to justify (in a letter to Scotland's Lord Advocate Archibald Colquhoun) his role in ejecting many hundreds of families from the Strath of Kildonan, Strathnaver and Strathbrora to make way for sheep farmers, one of them himself.

Knoydart. The Knoydart pensinsula, once home to more than a thousand people, was subjected to several clearances – culminating in the 1853 episode touched on here. The JMT's founding was bound up with attempts to forestall Knoydart's possible acquisition as a military training ground.

Third World. A term from the Cold War era. Today's equivalent might be *developing world*.

His, him, etc. *They* would be more appropriate today.

World Conservation Strategy. Published in 1980 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, with the co-operation of the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Wildlife Fund, this was, among other things, an early attempt to define and promote the concept of sustainable development. My much annotated and underlined copy has long gone. But the *Strategy*

can be found online.

Drumbuie. A 1973 proposal to build oil production platforms for the North Sea at Drumbuie in Wester Ross attracted widespread opposition – the projected platform yard eventually going ahead, some miles to the north, at Kishorn.

Integrated Development Programme (IDP). Funded largely by the European Economic Community or Common Market (today the European Union), the IDP, launched in 1982, aimed to boost the Western Isles economy by improving agriculture, infrastructure, etc.

Hugh MacLennan (1907-90) was a Canadian novelist and academic whose novels attempted to give a literary dimension to an emerging Canadian national identity.

Nobody but God has ever been there before you. Today (not least as a result of my spending time in the 1990s with people living on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Western Montana) I have a greater appreciation than I did in 1984 of the longstanding indigenous presence in the Americas. That said, I was well aware in 1984 (which is why my paper includes an upfront quote from Black Elk) that the forcible expulsion of indigenous people (the 'barbarous hordes' of Patrick Sellar's 1815 letter) from their homelands was by no means confined to the Highlands. Nor is it only in the Highlands that a good deal of today's 'wild land' was not so long ago occupied or put to use by those same indigenous people.

Past tree cover. I'm more aware today than I was in 1984 that the loss of tree cover in the Highlands was a more drawn-out process than indicated (somewhat over-romantically) here. I'm equally aware now that by no means all this loss is attributable to human action. Other factors, not least a changing climate, played a part.

Frank Fraser Darling (1903-79) was a naturalist and ecologist who spent many years in North West Scotland where, as well as producing pioneering wild life studies, he worked closely with crofters and, from Strontian, supervised the research team who helped make possible the production and publication (in 1955) of *West Highland Survey: An Essay in Human Ecology*, a book I treasure greatly. Fraser Darling's 1969 Reith Lectures, *Wilderness and Plenty*, delivered when he was Vice-President of the Conservation Foundation in Washington DC, were a key contribution to emerging concerns about humanity's impact on the natural environment.

Fraser Darling is one of my heroes as is evident from this account (*Press and Journal*, 3 November 1976) of my one meeting with him: 'Conservation, ecology: words and concepts which have sunk firmly into the consciousness of the developed world. After 100 or more years of industrialisation and of ever-increasing exploitation of the world's natural resources, it has finally been borne in ... that [our] activities are threatening to destroy this planet's natural environment ... It would be wrong to attribute this development to a single individual. But there is one man who has done more than

anyone else to bring about the recent revolution in people's attitudes to their natural surroundings. His name is Frank Fraser Darling. And he lives in retirement at Lochyhills on the outskirts of Forres.'

The Highlands are a devastated countryside. While it's easy to grasp devastation of the sort caused by an oil spill or some such, it's much harder, as Fraser Darling was well aware, to comprehend cumulative devastation of the sort he was looking to highlight. This point was explored by Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), another pioneer conservationist, in his posthumously published *Sand County Almanac*. 'One of the perils of an ecological education,' Leopold wrote, 'is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen.' Thus treeless hillsides and equally treeless grouse moors might be thought highly attractive scenically, while also being, in the Fraser Darling sense, devastated.

George Younger (1931-2009) was a Conservative politician who served as Secretary of State for Scotland from 1979 to 1986.

The '*externally managed*' and '*failed*' plants I had in mind in 1984 were: the Fort William pulp mill which lasted for 17 years and closed in 1981 with the loss of around a thousand jobs; the Invergordon aluminium smelter which lasted for just ten years and closed in 1981 with the loss of much the same number of jobs.

Nature Conservancy. Established in 1949, this was a UK government agency. It was replaced in 1973 by the Nature Conservancy Council which, in Scotland, was replaced in 1991 by Scottish Natural Heritage, itself now rebranded as NatureScot.

Some 2026 Perspectives

In 1984 there were few signs that ***forestry*** policy would evolve in ways suggested above. Reforestation was then typified by developments in the Caithness and Sutherland flow country where generous tax-breaks encouraged wealthy individuals to finance deep ploughing of peatland as a prelude to planting this peatland with exotic species like Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine. Not least because peatland (in consequence of manmade climate change) is now considered a key carbon store, policy has reversed. Peatland retention and restoration is now backed and, though commercial forestry interests still favour exotics, afforestation or reforestation increasingly involves native species.

A longstanding and continuing reduction in ***sheep*** numbers can be seen as equally positive from an ecological perspective. But this is less a consequence of policy than of the socio-economic difficulties confronting the hill-farming and crofting sectors. These might have been mitigated in a post-Brexit context by remodelling agricultural support policy in such a way as to shift support from larger to smaller operators. This hasn't happened. Nor has there been any meaningful attempt to create a

modern equivalent of the hill ***cattle*** economy that prevailed in the pre-clearance Highlands and that, from an ecological standpoint as well as in other ways, was hugely more beneficial than the sheep economy that took its place.

Still more depressing in a land use context is the seemingly endless growth in ***deer*** numbers and the persistence over wide areas of hopelessly deleterious practices (like ground-cover burning) associated with the wildlife killing grounds or grouse moors that loom so large in upland Scotland. Equally disappointing, despite the emergence of community woodlands (see below) and some planting on farm and croft land, has been lack of progress towards ***forestry-farming integration*** and more diversified forest ownership – forestry still being owned overwhelmingly by the state or by large-scale private interests.

My 1984 paper's references to ***Gaelic*** and to ***cultural issues*** more widely derived from my awareness as a historian of the extent to which people in the Highlands and Islands were long told that everything about them, starting with their Gaelic language, was inferior, second-rate, of no account. Developmentally, this was disastrous. When your supposed inadequacy and inferiority are dinned into you by practically everyone in authority, you can't but end up lacking self-esteem. And where there isn't self-esteem, there can't be enterprise, initiative, advancement. That's why it's vital to encourage both individuals and communities in the Scottish north to take pride in their localities, to feel good about themselves, their surroundings, their heritage – both natural and cultural.

There has been progress. Enhanced public spending on Gaelic, practically non-existent in 1984, has led, for example, to a major expansion of Gaelic broadcasting and enhanced availability of Gaelic-medium education. Indigenous music has flourished. Higher educational opportunities have been opened up across the north by the University of the Highlands and Islands. Comments to the effect that 'you can't live on scenery' are less often heard now that natural environment (locally as well as globally) is valued more highly – especially by young people. Something of these and other changes is reflected in surveys showing that (despite the obstacles put in the way of this ambition by housing shortages and other difficulties) many of the north's young people are more attracted than my generation was to the notion that their area has a great deal to offer them.

This progress notwithstanding, policy approaches, whether on the part of government or voluntary organisations, aren't significantly more integrated today than they were in 1984. Cultural policy, development policy and environmental policy continue to be formulated in separate silos – with little in the way of overlap or mutual reinforcement. The same can be said of ***land reform*** which is treated as if were a purely sectoral matter under a rural affairs heading – rather than being seen as something with implications for a wide range of policy sectors.

Nor has there been any ***administrative decentralisation*** of the sort I advocated in 1984. Fisheries management, for instance, continues to be shaped centrally. Over the last 40-plus years, moreover, administration of almost every type has become increasingly remote. This is especially evident in

local government. In contrast to much of Western Europe, where local councils are truly local, Scotland has been lumbered with extraordinarily large authorities. Thus Kilchoan and John o'Groats, some eight hours apart by road, are administered by a single council based in Inverness – itself 120 miles or more from both of these places. This is absurd. But it's indicative of wider trends.

Thus the Local Enterprise Companies (LECs), established in 1991 and run by entirely unpaid boards, were abolished in 2007 and their functions taken over by Inverness-based Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) which itself has been shorn of influence and cash. The considerable autonomy once enjoyed by HIE and its predecessor organisation, the Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB) has been curtailed – HIE now being treated as a mere 'delivery agency' by Scottish governments which have also subjected HIE's budget to repeated cuts. Much the same is true of other agencies, other authorities. The 1999 re-establishment of a Scottish parliament may have resulted in significant power being devolved from London to Edinburgh. But there has been no corresponding devolution from Edinburgh. Rather the reverse – Scotland, as a result, being one of Europe's most overcentralised countries.

Alongside this – and with few exceptions – the Scottish north's ***natural resources*** continue to be developed principally for the benefit of largely external (often overseas) interests. This is still more true of fish farming than it was in 1984. Oil-related development, meanwhile, has largely come and gone – the long-run outcome being much as forecast by Texas Jim, oilman character in John McGrath's landmark production from 1973, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. 'All you folks are off your head,' Jim sings to Scots, 'I'm getting rich from your seabed.' 'I'll go home when I see fit,' Jim continues, 'All I'll leave is a heap of shit.'

Today the Scottish north's ***renewables*** assets are being exploited in ways that conform closely to this age-old pattern – one that can be traced back to the seaweed-based kelp industry of the early nineteenth century when kelp was, for a time, a lucrative source of industrial alkali. Again very big and often foreign companies predominate. Community benefit, to be sure, is available to local populations and has delivered worthwhile gains. But as can be seen from the record of our handful of community-owed windfarms (in Lewis, Gigha and elsewhere), community benefit payments amount to only a small proportion of total windfarm revenues which, outside the tiny community-owned sector, accrue elsewhere. The contrast with Denmark, where around half of all windfarms are locally owned is stark. And across the windfarm-rich north, by way of adding insult to injury, electricity prices are among the highest in the UK – as are rates of fuel poverty.

And what, since 1984, of that most basic of all resources, ***land***? The short answer is that, while much has changed, much more has stayed the same. As in the 1980s – as in any decade in the last 200 years or more – a huge proportion of Scotland's land resource is in the hands of a miniscule number of owners. Just 408 owners, the latest figures suggest, own half of Scotland's privately owned rural land. And since this compares with 440 owners in 2012, ***ownership concentration*** – a concentration without parallel in much of the world – is becoming more, not less, extreme. One of this

concentration's many adverse effects (others are touched on below) is that a handful of owners (consisting increasingly of asset management and private equity interests) benefit disproportionately from already mentioned and taxpayer-funded measures to expand afforestation or engage in peatland restoration.

Where there has been advance is in the area of **community land ownership**. My 1984 paper's advocacy of what I called 'local experiments in community ownership' was a response to the then Conservative government's privatisation agenda. This was proceeding at pace, with a succession of publicly-owned industries, utilities and assets – gas, electricity, telecommunications, steel, water, etc – going into private hands. The Forestry Commission, it was thought, was destined to go the same way. So, it was also thought, were the crofting estates managed by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland (DAFS). These dated from early twentieth-century ventures in land settlement when DAFS' predecessor agencies, the Congested Districts Board and the Board of Agriculture for Scotland, acquired extensive (and once-cleared) areas with a view to creating many hundreds of new crofts.

My 1984 suggestion with regard to DAFS properties was one I'd return to. In the event, however, DAFS properties weren't privatised, and when, in 1990-91, the 150,000 acres owned by DAFS in Skye and Raasay were offered to their crofter residents on a collective basis, the offer was turned down – not least because crofters couldn't see their way to finding the £155,000 (well in excess of £500,000 at today's prices) DAFS was spending annually on administering those same estates. Subsequent community takeovers of non-DAFS land would show that even extensive properties can be managed effectively for a fraction of DAFS-type expenditure. But despite this and despite legislation (Transfer of Crofting Estates Act 1997) intended to facilitate such developments, only one state-owned crofting estate (West Harris) has gone into community ownership.

Like the DAFS estates, the Forestry Commission escaped wholesale privatisation. But starting in the later 1990s, a good deal of land previously owned by the Commission or its successor agency, Forestry and Land Scotland, has gone into community control of the sort that, despite my promoting it in 1984, I then thought unlikely to happen. This land accounts for the bulk of the acreage making up the 200 or more **community woodlands** now in existence in Scotland.

Although community ownership of the DAFS estates in Skye and Raasay proved a non-starter, the 1990-91 possibility of this going ahead (together with the publicity thus generated) had two wider effects. It led to crofters and others taking a growing interest in the community ownership concept. And it resulted in Lewis lawyer, the late Simon Fraser, devising on behalf of the Scottish Crofters Union (where I worked from 1986 to 1990) the legal and administrative arrangements that would be needed to make community ownership a reality. It was no coincidence, then, that when, in 1992, the North Assynt Estate was put on the market by its absentee owners and when the estate's crofter occupiers mounted a successful effort to buy it, Simon Fraser acted throughout as their legal adviser – a development that led to the estate's crofter owners adopting a management structure of the kind

that would have been put in place on the DAFS properties in Skye and Raasay had their transfer to crofters gone ahead.

Similar structures, often with Simon Fraser's input, would be put in place on most of the larger-scale community purchases of land that were to occur in the years around and after 2000. There were a lot of these. That's why, across Scotland, more than half a million acres are now in community ownership.

That's a big achievement. But perspective is required. Community land ownership is geographically concentrated – nearly three-quarters of such land being in the Western Isles. And the overall total, though impressive, amounts to less than 3 per cent of Scotland's land area. Across the country as a whole ownership (as indicated above) is more concentrated than ever – despite the Scottish parliament having enacted, since 2003, a series of measures under a land reform heading.

Continued concentration notwithstanding, the Scottish parliament's commitment to land contrasts sharply with the 1984 position – land reform having then been off the UK's legislative agenda for more than 60 years. Among key institutional consequences have been the 2012 establishment of a publicly financed ***Scottish Land Fund*** and the 2017 launch of a ***Scottish Land Commission*** – the Land Fund's remit being to assist with community asset purchases and the Commission's role being to provide the Scottish government with evidence-based guidance on how best to bring about what the Commission calls 'a fairer, more transparent and productive system of land ownership and use'.

Because the Land Commission is strictly advisory, it's easy to minimise its significance. But it represents a huge advance. In 1984, for example, there had been no officially-backed analysis of the concentrated nature of land ownership in Scotland since the UK government's 1873 'Return of Owners of Land'. Making good this deficiency began, not with research of the type the Land Commission conducts but with individual effort in the shape of the 1977 publication of *Who Owns Scotland?* by retired forester John McEwen (1887-1992). 'All my life I have been close to the land,' McEwen wrote in his book's opening chapter. 'There is, however, nothing soft or sentimental in my attitude towards it, rather a deep growing concern over ... the way in which it has been managed, leading to its present degraded, underdeveloped condition. This is due to the fact of ownership, in the main, by powerful, selfish, antisocial landlords.'

McEwen's findings, together with his explicitly anti-landlord opinions, were at once attacked by owners and their political allies. This didn't worry him. 'I positively enjoy controversy,' the then 90-year old John McEwen told me when (shortly after his book's publication) I met with him in his Perthshire home. 'It's good to get in a good dig at the lairds. Great to hit them really hard.' (*Press and Journal*, 25 November, 1977.)

John McEwen's favoured way forward from the ownership pattern he uncovered was land nationalisation. But John McGrath (of *Cheviot* fame) added a rider to this.'The land needs to be

nationalised,' McGrath wrote in his *Who Owns Scotland?* foreword, 'in order to put it under local community control, with capital assistance, guidance information and technical help from a central authority.'

Thinking of this sort influenced my 1984 mentions of community ownership possibilities. And it's possible to see something of what McGrath advocated both in the twenty-first-century expansion of community ownership and in the backing given to this expansion by public agencies like the Scottish Land Fund, the Scottish Land Commission and, from an early stage, HIE which had a key role in financing and otherwise assisting a variety of community land ownership trusts (and which I chaired from 1998 to 2004).

But as shown by the comparatively limited proportion of the overall land resource that's gone into community ownership, its (now largely stalled) expansion is unlikely of itself to result in far-reaching change in the ownership pattern highlighted by John McEwen and highlighted, too, by the more recent work of Andy Wightman. Some of the adverse consequences of this pattern were underlined in the Scottish Land Commission's 2019 *Review of Scale and Concentration of Land Ownership*, much the most substantial and authoritative investigation of a topic that's been central to land-reform-related discussion in Scotland since the extent of concentration was exposed (and castigated) by John McEwen.

Where owners exercise monopoly ownership of land over large areas, the Land Commission showed, the impacts – as with monopoly power in any economic sector – are adverse, sometimes acutely so. Housing provision, nature conservation, economic development and associated employment creation can be – and are – impeded. Inequality is enhanced, opportunity curtailed and communities denied any say in what's being done with – and to – the land surrounding them.

The Land Reform Act 2025 is, in effect, the Scottish government's legislative response to those Land Commission findings. The Act obliges owners of 1,000-plus hectares (2,471-plus acres) to develop land management plans and to engage with local communities while doing so – something that can be seen as a move towards the 'local control' of land use I suggested in my 1984 paper. Owners will also have to give advance notice of sales and government ministers will be empowered to insist, prior to sales, on the 'lotting', or breaking up, of 1,000-plus hectare properties. This, it's hoped, will boost the prospects of community purchases while also diversifying landholding in ways that reduce ownership concentration.

The long-run effect of these and other 2025 measures will depend on how determinedly they're enforced by government. But for all that the 2025 Act adds up to something of an advance, it's hard to do other than suspect that it won't greatly alter the fundamentals of an ownership structure that's for so long impacted so negatively on the public good. That's principally because this latest Act, like other twenty-first-century land-related legislation, lacks the radical edge of earlier land reforms. Thus the Crofters Act 1886 enforced a range of far-reaching changes of a sort that would scarcely be

contemplated by government today. Crofters were provided, for instance, with a uniquely comprehensive form of security that made this security, as it remains, something that could be passed from one tenant to another in perpetuity. At the same time, croft rent-fixing powers were removed entirely from landlords and vested, as they're still vested, in a quasi-judicial body – today the Scottish Land Court. Would such a drastic reduction in landed influence be contemplated by today's Scottish government? I doubt it. Just as I think it improbable (to put the point mildly) that the Scottish parliament, as currently constituted, would countenance settlement legislation of the early twentieth-century variety – legislation which (as mentioned above) led to government agencies creating numerous new crofts on land acquired for this purpose.

Still less likely to be agreed is legislation of the sort applied to Ireland by Conservative governments at a time when all of Ireland was still in the UK. This legislation (culminating in an Act of 1903) resulted in government agencies, most notably the Irish Land Commission, supervising the transfer of land from its owners to its occupiers. The process thus initiated made Ireland what it remains today, both north and south of the present-day border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, an island of owner-occupying farmers and smallholders – not (as it once was and as Scotland remains) a territory dominated by often very large estates.

But if it's difficult to envisage a Scottish government doing what the UK Conservative Party did in Ireland, experience suggests that, even in Scotland – a country where politicians of all stripes steer well clear of bringing an end to a landownership structure that's for far too long been treated as immutable – far-reaching change is possible.

I made my initial visit to Scotland's crofting heartlands in the summer of 1972. I was one year into researching and writing the doctoral thesis that would be published, 50 years ago this summer, as *The Making of the Crofting Community*. And I was accompanied by Evelyn, my wife. We'd just married and I'd persuaded Evelyn that our honeymoon should consist of a walking tour of Skye and the Outer Isles – a tour conducted, most fortuitously, in spectacularly fine weather.

Almost all the Lewis, Harris and Uist crofting townships Evelyn and I hiked through in that long ago July were then in the ownership of absentee landlords. Those same townships were much in my mind when, two or three years later, I completed *The Making of the Crofting Community* with a quotation from *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil.* 'The people do not own the land,' I wrote. 'The people do not control the land.' Not until that situation was remedied, I added, would the crofting community be master of its own destiny.

Today, a half-century on from those words' publication, most of the Outer Isles croft land I first set eyes on when on honeymoon is controlled, not by lairds of the sort who once owned this land, but by the people who live on and around it. Might the next 50 years see this become true of a great deal more of rural Scotland? That question won't be answered in my lifetime. But I very much hope the answer to it will be yes.

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