

‘Green Landowners’: profiting from the ecological emergency

Governments and corporations have at least acknowledged that there is a climate emergency and looming ecological disaster. However, they will not take actions that will negatively affect economic growth or capitalist profits. Whether it is electric cars or ‘green’ energy, the stress is on keeping up production and consumption rather than actually addressing the fundamental problems caused by capitalism’s need for continued growth.

Conveniently, a solution has been found for companies to continue with business as usual whilst claiming to be doing something against climate change. Rather than reducing CO₂ emissions, they can instead offset their emissions by doing things such as plant trees. The idea of carbon offsetting has been around for some time with trees being planted in the Amazon or similar, but recently corporations have found the UK an idea place to offset carbon emissions and make money at the same time.

Upland Britain: From Grouse Moor and Hill Farm to Rewilding

Much of upland Britain consists of land that has had little value in economic terms. Moorlands make up most of this land and were traditionally used by farmers to eke out a living with cattle and sheep. This changed in the 19th century with the railway and the invention of the breech loading shotgun. The moors became a playground as driven grouse shooting became an obsession for the rich both in Britain and abroad. Land that had been next to worthless in terms of market value became very valuable as the rich scrambled to purchase what became known as a ‘sporting estate’. There are 150 grouse moors in England and about the same in Scotland. These are usually part of even larger estates that might also incorporate deer stalking, farming, and forestry.

Recently, however, there has been a decline in grouse shooting. This is partly due to problems with grouse numbers- the ‘grouse bag’ is not as big as it once was due to climate change and other factors. The political situation has also put a damper on the desirability of owning a grouse moor. Campaigners have succeeded to an extent in raising awareness of the problems caused by grouse moors, including the frequent illegal killing of birds of prey, degradation of peatland caused by heather burning (used by gamekeepers to ensure new growth for grouse chicks), and the health dangers of lead bullets used in both grouse and pheasant shooting. Though pro-grouse shooting groups such as the Moorland Association are fighting hard to retain the sport they feel passionate about, the general situation has led to less interest in maintaining grouse moors. Owning a grouse moor has never been a big money earner. They are usually bought by those who see themselves as part of this traditional elite culture, more as a way of life and status symbol than as an investment. With less interest in maintaining this traditional culture, a new breed of land owner is emerging. They are equally rich, but now more interested in transforming the land by restoring habitats and degraded peatland, planting trees, increasing biodiversity, often referred to as rewilding. However, there are distinct differences between different types of ‘green’ landowner.

‘Good’ Landowners?

Many of these new ‘green’ or ‘conservation’ land owners are sincere in their desire to address the serious ecological issues we face. The Dane, Anders Povlsen, is now the biggest landowner in Britain. He has been buying up land mainly in Scotland for decades and his estates are considered models of good environmental practice. There has been considerable progress in tree regeneration and peatland restoration. He has started up a company called Wild Scotland (<https://wildland.scot/>) and his ideas are increasingly being taken up by other similar landowners.

Many are inspired by the Knepp Estate in Sussex whose farming gentry owners decided that it was a struggle to keep their farm going so decided to rewild, hoping to make an income from grants

and other public subsidies that exist to promote ecological restoration. Their project has been hugely successful, both ecologically and financially.

Camille and Christopher Bentley from California are an example. Christopher made loads of money as a property developer and now he and his wife are keen to salve their consciences. They have bought a grouse moor in southern Scotland and are investing a lot of money in various projects beneficial to the environment.

There are issues with such a model, the general inequality of landownership is maintained (These issues will be discussed later). These land owners are similar in some ways to those who own sporting estates. They made their money elsewhere and the estate is more of a hobby. Many are passionate about the land and care about it even if the sporting estate and conservation estate have quite different objectives.

However, looking at Real Wild Estates (www.realwildstates.com), a new company set up, it is obvious that investment opportunities and financial returns motivates most of the new landowners. The website says it all:

“We provide investors with access to large UK landscapes of 1,000+ acres which are suitable for nature restoration with viable natural capital potential. We are aware of multiple exciting opportunities so please contact us for further information. We search for property across the UK with a focus on: Traditional Southern English Estates, Scottish Farms and Estates, North England Moorland and Upland Farms”.

Land as Natural Capital

The recent climate summit (COP26) achieved very little apart from spurring interest in achieving net zero admissions without actually reducing emissions. Rather than reducing their emissions, companies can offset these emissions by either taking carbon out of the atmosphere and storing it, or by investing in projects that stop release of carbon in the first place.

“Although there is much hype around the promise of impressive Negative Emissions' Technologies (NETs), such as carbon capture and storage, to date the only proven NET is the restoration of forests, peatlands and other natural carbon sinks. In order to scale up investment in ‘nature-based solutions’ many governments are embracing the so-called ‘natural capital’ approach to conservation, which involves assigning monetary valuations to natural assets such as forests and then enabling investors to extract financial returns for managing these assets sustainably”
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/scotland-is-on-the-global-frontlines-of-the-great-net-zero-land-grab/>.

Note how any discussion of ‘sustainability’ is linked to “extracting financial returns”. Like mining, green energy, and other extractivist industries, natural resources are being used by capitalism to make profits, despite the green rhetoric. The outcome may be preferable in that the environment should be restored and enhanced, benefiting both the climate and ecosystems, but the motivation for doing this is a serious problem,

Land, especially in the uplands of Scotland, is the main source of natural capital because of the quantity and type of rural land available. 98% of the country is classified as remote rural or accessible rural. Peatland, covering 20% of the country, is a major carbon sink (something that retains carbon). A market has developed- a market of carbon credits. This has created a huge increase in the demand for land that before was bought mainly for the status of owning a sporting estate. Savills and other agents have noticed a big increase in interest. Galbraith have a special department devoted to those seeking to offset carbon.

Speaking from Savills: “We are perhaps on the cusp of [grouse shooting estates] being repurposed for more climate-efficient purposes,” says Ms Channing, and Mr Watson adds: “What I think we’re seeing is the enthusiasm for buying wild upland land is high. One reason is that you can plant trees, but there’s also the peatland and the carbon. There’s a new demand for these types of assets, which underwrite the asset value, and which gives more confidence to owners that there is an asset value without the sport. There are new revenue streams”.

John Williams, an associate in the rural asset management team at Knight Frank, agrees: “We went to the market at £650,000 for 2,700 acres of moorland in the south-west. It’s in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and contains a Site of Special Scientific Interest. We had a huge amount of interest, both locally and from the green investment funds and multinational companies looking to offset their carbon footprint. “It’s a whole new side of the market, especially with the Environmental Land Management scheme coming down the line, and carbon sequestration through tree planting and peat. The demand and offers we have received are well above the guide and people are still calling as it’s not technically under offer”

(<https://www.shootinguk.co.uk/grouse-shooting/who-buys-grouse-moors-122158>).

Many ways to profit

There are several advantages to companies of this new land grab. One is as a marketing tool, making the company look good to shareholders and the public. They can carry on their normal activities and still claim to be carbon-neutral. One example is Brewdog, who have come under scrutiny recently because of their employment practices and sexist culture. As the CEOs of Brewdog have always said, “Everything is marketing”. Their recent purchase of the 3767 hectare Kinrara Estate near Aviemore in the Cairngorm National Park is a great marketing ploy with the talk of planting a “Lost Forest” on the traditional sporting estate, helping them to raise their profile as a ‘green’ company which they will capitalise on in their marketing campaigns, thus indirectly generating profits. They are also going to be able to attract grants from the Scottish government and have been accused of overstating what they are doing.

(See: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/mar/05/lost-forest-why-is-brewdog-green-scheme-causing-controversy>)

Another company that has bought land in the Cairngorms is Standard Life Investments:

“Standard Life Investments Property Income (SLI) is backing moves to reforest part of Scotland’s Cairngorm national park in a bid to become a ‘net zero’ emitter of greenhouse gases. In a marked departure from its normal holdings in industrial properties, offices and warehouses, the generalist UK real estate investment trust (Reit) has spent £7.5m on 1,447 hectares of upland rough grazing and moorland in the heart of the Scottish Highlands

(<https://www.theaic.co.uk/aic/news/citywire-news/standard-life-reit-buys-big-highlands-plot-in-net-zero-drive>)”.

Capitalism takes advantage of environmental crisis: the market in carbon

Carbon offsetting is linked to the production of carbon credits. Capitalism has always managed to assign a monetary value to carbon. By reducing carbon through activities such as planting trees, a landowner, farmer or even a community will produce carbon credits which can be used to offset their own emissions or be sold on to others. So companies do not have to buy land themselves and plant their own trees. Instead they buy carbon credits to offset their emissions.

“A carbon market allows investors and corporations to trade both carbon credits and carbon offsets simultaneously. This mitigates the environmental crisis, while also creating new market opportunities. New challenges nearly always produce new markets, and the ongoing climate crisis

and rising global emissions are no exception. You can think of carbon credits as a “permission slip” for a company to emit up to a certain set amount of CO₂e that year <https://carboncredits.com/>”.

These are some of the companies in the US who are amongst the top buyers of carbon credits: Alphabet (parent company of Google), Cemex (concrete producer), Microsoft, Delta and JetBlue (airlines), General Motors (cars), Shell, Unilever, and Disney (www.perillon.com/blog/12-companies-that-are-buying-carbon-offsets).

To facilitate the buying of credits, companies are springing up all over. Here is an example of one in Britain: <https://carbonneutralbritain.org/pages/become-a-carbon-neutral-business>. The website pushes this on the basis of marketing.

“In 2019, a YouGov study of over 9000 consumers found that they were 67% more likely to choose a product or service from a business that is taking action on climate change and the environment. In 2020, a Nielsen study also found 66% of all consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable brands. This figure is even higher for millennials (73%) and Gen Z (72%)”.

Shell is an example of a company that is heavily involved in carbon offsetting. It has engaged in carbon offsetting in Peru, Indonesia, and now Glengarry in Scotland. Their website looks like something from the Scottish Wildlife Trust as they paint a picture of themselves as the champion of forests and wildlife. Their support for projects is used as a way of acquiring carbon credits which are part of a promotional campaign aimed at attracting drivers to their petrol pumps.

“Shell is supporting the Glengarry forest scheme because forests and ecosystems such as these can play a vital role in helping tackle climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. This work will generate independently certified carbon credits. Carbon credits allow Shell to offer an option for customers to offset CO₂ emissions from their fuel purchases in the Netherlands and, most recently, in the UK” <https://www.shell.com/inside-energy/scotland-highland-forests-rewilding.html>.

Shell may not make money directly from carbon credits- it is more of a marketing ploy to make drivers feel less guilty because they are gaining carbon credits by buying fuel from Shell. However, there is a lot of money to be made by those who do not just want to offset their own emissions. The reason for companies such as Real Wild Land Estates being set up is that there is money to be made by selling carbon credits to companies like Shell, Easyjet and British Airways.

“Our cutting edge proprietary software tool can be used to assess any viable landscape for nature restoration, and includes all natural capital, commercial and conventional income streams to generate long term monetary yield. To justify any sustainable impact investments in large landscape acquisition for solutions to climate change and biodiversity loss, we have to assess the risks and returns of long-term investments” <https://www.realwildestates.com/wildncat-tool/>”.

Like other products in capitalism, the value of something goes up with demand. The carbon credit market has seen a continual increase in the value of the credits because of the pressure on companies to appear to be doing something about climate change without having to actually reduce emissions (<https://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/articles/press-release-voluntary-carbon-markets-rocket-in-2021-on-track-to-break-1b-for-first-time/>). It is this that has led to the current land grab as well as changing of land use by traditional landowners, including farmers.

False Solutions

Apart from the sickening hypocrisy of carbon offsetting and the carbon market, these much-vaunted solutions are not solutions at all. Neither models of tackling the ecological crisis- the genuine green landowner or the profit-driven natural capital investors- are solutions to the problems faced whether in terms of the ecological crisis or social justice.

As with everything else they do, corporations are able to create an illusion that masks the underlying reality. There are some certification schemes to ensure that a certain standard has been met, e.g. the Voluntary Carbon Standard (VCS) and the Voluntary Gold Standard (VGS) but there is no regulating body to make sure that the carbon credits earned actually do offset emissions. In addition, there is no way of knowing whether the project being invested in would have happened anyway.

For example, closer scrutiny suggests that, in some cases at least, Shell's claim may be at odds with reality. "A joint investigation by SourceMaterial and Unearthed, Greenpeace's investigative journalism unit found that forests Shell says it's protecting in Peru and Indonesia may not be in immediate danger, while benefits from a Scottish tree-planting project are apparently being counted twice" <https://www.source-material.org/blog/shell-drive-carbon-neutral-claims-in-doubt-after-forest-scrutiny>.

Heather Rogers, author of *Green Gone Wrong*: "visited a number of offset schemes in India and found all kinds of irregularities. One VGS-certified biomass power plant refused to allow her around, though staff there reported a number of concerns such as trees being chopped down and sold to the plant, which was designed to run on agricultural wastes" <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/sep/16/carbon-offset-projects-carbon-emissions>.

Even if the companies were completely accurate in their assessment of how much carbon emissions they have offset, there is still the crucial question of whether carbon offsetting can actually solve the climate crisis without an actual drastic reduction in emissions.

"In particular, experts have criticised reforestation projects as a way for companies to justify producing huge amounts of carbon emissions. Alia Al Ghussain, a digital campaigner at Greenpeace wrote: "A newly-planted tree can take as many as 20 years to capture the amount of CO₂ that a carbon-offset scheme promises. We would have to plant and protect a massive number of trees for decades to offset even a fraction of global emissions" <https://www.bigissue.com/news/environment/carbon-offsetting-can-it-help-solve-climate-change/>.

The same goes for the other rewilding projects of the 'green' landowners. Either they are getting carbon credits for doing nothing, i.e. not chopping down trees, not digging up peat, or their reforestation and peat restoration plans will take decades to have an impact on climate change.

"Selling Indulgences"

As stated above, carbon offsetting is nothing but permission to emit. George Monbiot compares it to the selling of indulgences. You can carry on sinning but buy your way into heaven <https://www.monbiot.com/2006/10/19/selling-indulgences/>.

Bill Gates of Microsoft and Amazon boss Jeff Bezos are big buyers of carbon credits. Around the time of COP26:

"Gates celebrated his 66th birthday by hosting dozens of guests, including fellow billionaire Jeff Bezos, on a mega-yacht in the Mediterranean Sea near Turkey's coast. Some of the guests were reportedly flown to the yacht on helicopters, according to Turkish newspaper Daily Sabah. Just days later, Bezos faced similar backlash for flying his private jet to the COP26 climate summit in Scotland — a particular sort of irony. Ultra-wealthy people often argue that their high profiles and busy schedules require them to travel via private planes, helicopters or yachts" <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/05/why-bill-gates-and-jeff-bezos-buy-carbon-offsets-how-they-work.html>.

Not only does this seem completely illogical reasoning, it shows the gross inequality of the consequences of climate change, with the rich able to carry on business as usual.

Another problem is that as demand goes up for carbon credits, the price goes up. This means that companies will have to fork out more and more money, something of course they will be reluctant to do, in order to offset emissions. It is good news for those owning land who can sell the carbon credits but not so good for those companies who are buying carbon credits. It seems that if the trend continues, with competition for carbon credits increasing, there will not be enough credits to go round (<https://sustainablereview.com/carbon-offsets-should-be-more-expensive/#:~:text=Carbon%20offsets%20don't%20work%20because%20if%20every%20company%20chose,decarbonize%20the%20global%20economy%20anyway>).

Scientists and climate justice campaigners agree that though many of these offsetting projects are worthwhile, they should be happening anyway and not be a substitute for companies actually reducing emissions. Tackling climate change requires that carbon stays in the ground and that current forests are not chopped down.

The only real solution is to get rid of capitalism. However, even environmental campaigners are reluctant to take the bull by the horns:

“If we’re serious about tackling climate change, there is only one answer to the problem: these companies and industries need to put people and planet over profit by completely overhauling their business models” <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/the-biggest-problem-with-carbon-offsetting-is-that-it-doesnt-really-work/>.

Business models **cannot be overhauled**, they are an integral part of capitalism.

Green landowners and social justice

Whatever the motivation for buying up land for environmental objectives, there are certainly benefits. Planting native species, restoring peatland, and enhancing habitats for biodiversity are all positive steps. However, not only are they not enough to stop climate change, partly because of the long-term nature of such projects, they also have some very negative social and economic consequences.

The main limitation is the fact that green landowners perpetuate the private landowning system, dominated by powerful, wealthy individuals and corporations. Great Britain, especially Scotland, is noted for its incredibly unequal land distribution. The big names in private land ownership in Scotland, e.g. The Duke of Sunderland, the Duke of Buccleuch, Duke of Westminster, are part of a UK-wide tradition of aristocratic ownership. This traditional aristocratic owner is now joined by wealthy foreigners and corporations as well as conservation organisations (<https://www.sundaypost.com/news/scottish-news/aristocrats-tycoons-and-billionaires-the-people-who-really-own-scotland-2/>). The foreign landowners take advantage of the fact that it is so easy to buy large tracts of land in places like the Highlands. They can then indulge in whatever their hobby happens to be whether rewilding or shooting. Corporations and other institutional investors have other motivations all linked to making a profit. As with other aspects of capitalism, money breeds money. So, if you have money in the first place it is easy to buy up resources such as land and make more money. This means that land ownership, and the economic benefits and political power that goes with it, continue to be dominated by a few.

Peter Peacock, a land rights campaigner based in Scotland says: “Wealthy institutions can afford to spend millions buying up bits of Scotland and are then expecting the taxpayer to pay for the planting of the trees they plant, all enhancing their existing wealth”.

Peacock and other land justice campaigners such as Andy Wightman fear that this current land grab will make it even more difficult to advance the cause of land reform and increase the amount of community and public ownership of land.

Peacock: “This is likely to see, once again, the Highlands being sold from under the feet of local people to external forces who can out-compete other interests for land, forcing up land prices, and undermine communities in their ability to take a lead in tackling the climate emergency while also promoting wider social and economic benefit under local democratic control”

(<https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/politics/scottish-politics/3100564/peter-peacock-green-lairds/>).

Wightman is concerned that this “gold rush” for land in Scotland will push land prices up and make it even more difficult for communities or other public interest owners such as the John Muir Trust to purchase land (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-59592218>). The Langholm Initiative in southern Scotland had to raise millions of pounds to buy land from the Duke of Buccleuch who insisted on selling part of his large landholdings at market prices. The community managed to raise the money to purchase part of the land they wanted with the help of the John Muir Trust but it was very difficult. If land prices go up even more such community buy-out initiatives would be impossible.

Why does it matter that land ownership is unequal? The Scottish Land Commission has done research on this issue and has found that having a system dominated by large land holdings has a negative impact on local communities as well as society as a whole. (See:

<https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/our-work/ownership/scale-and-concentration-of-land-ownership>). Large landowners have both economic and political power. Many have a direct line to key figures in government, some of whom will be in the House of Lords, and also have a number of lobbying bodies such as the Scottish Landowners Federation. Local government is also heavily influenced by large landowners in the area, seen as major sources of income and employment. According to the Land Commission Report: “Perhaps most worrying however, was the fear of repercussions from “going against the landowner” expressed by some people. This fear was rooted firmly in the concentration of power in some communities and the perceived ability of landowners to inflict consequences such as eviction or blacklisting for employment/contracts on residents should they so wish”

(https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/5dd7d6fd9128e_Investigation-Issues-Large-Scale-and-Concentrated-Landownership-20190320.pdf).

Bonnie VandeSteege in her book *Land for What? Land for Whom?* found a similar situation in the Cairngorms of Scotland. Local landowners dominated consultations on key issues during the formation of the National Park. They, or their representatives, sit on key boards and make sure they are a major ‘stakeholder’ whenever an important decision has to be made. Meanwhile, ordinary people’s voices are not heard. Local residents told her that they were often afraid to speak out. It will be interesting to see what role the new local landowners in the Cairngorms, Brewdog, play. They have already been criticised by the local paper for not taking into consideration the local community. They made members of staff redundant when they took over the Kinrara estate.

There is also a problem for agricultural land. Environment Secretary George Eustice has announced some new measures which will replace the EU subsidy system. Farmers will be paid under the Landscape Recovery Scheme for making space for nature by planting trees, making ponds and creating wildflower meadows on unproductive parts of their land. Corporations are not just buying up moorland but also productive agricultural land with an eye to getting their hands on some of this money. Though negotiations are still going on, it looks as if land holdings will have to be of a certain size to benefit. It is also very difficult for small farmers to find the time and the expertise to wade through the necessary bureaucracy and paper work in order to qualify.

Agroecological farmers are also concerned that money will not be made available to grow good quality food and instead land will be used for carbon offsetting schemes. Jyoti Fernandes, the Landworkers' Alliance Campaigns and Policy Coordinator, says: "The danger of this approach is that many of the holdings of this size will be land owned by corporations or landed gentry, which means our public money will continue to flow to the very richest in society, while access to land will become increasingly more difficult for new entrants to farming". <https://landworkersalliance.org.uk/response-to-landscape-recovery-scheme/>

James Dyson, known for the invention of the bagless Hoover is an example of the kind of landowner who will most benefit. He has been buying up land all over England, including farm land (<https://whoownsengland.org/2017/09/19/why-is-james-dyson-hoovering-up-land/>). He is now the biggest farming landowner in Britain (<https://www.fwi.co.uk/business/dyson-farming-empire-now-worth-more-than-500m>). Though supporting a hard Brexit, Dyson has argued for the UK to keep up its subsidy payments to farmers. He has already made millions out of these subsidies and is set to earn more with both carbon offsetting and environment subsidies.

Top-down approaches lead to increased inequality

Despite claims that it doesn't really matter who owns the land, the political and economic power associated with landownership cannot be dismissed so easily. One example is Jeremy Leggett, ex-Greenpeace director who made millions with a solar energy company. He has bought up several estates in the Scotland, Bunloit on Loch Ness and Beldorney near Huntley in Aberdeenshire. He has formed a company called Highland Rewilding Ltd. Looking at the website for Bunloit (<https://www.bunloit.com/>), one could easily be persuaded that this is the way forward- tackling climate change, enhancing biodiversity, and providing green jobs. The company is referred to as a "mass ownership company" (<https://www.highlandsrewilding.co.uk/>). On the website: "Highlands Rewilding will begin with a founding-funder round involving high-net-worth individuals, family offices and impact-investment organisations. We will follow with a mass-outreach crowdfunding campaign, once we have identified or formed a platform that can handle many small investments involving co-ownership of land".

This highlights the dangers. There will necessarily be a hierarchy of decision-making if there are different levels of investors. You need to be well-off to even think of investing in such a project. You cannot help but have a hierarchy of decision-making if there are people like Leggett who are the owner and a group of others who are part of an inner circle. Community ownership of land is problematic at the best of times; how can you ensure equality of decision-making when there is income and social inequality within the community itself. So trying to argue that the community will be truly involved in a model that is still dominated by a landowner, is good PR but not realistic.

Oddly enough, the biggest critics of green lairds from the point of view of the community are the traditional landowners, who argue that green lairds represent a new elite. Jamie Williamson of Alvie Estate, the neighbour to Kinrara, owned by Brewdog, has been particularly scathing, stressing the importance of the shooting industry to local employment. The rise of the green lairds is being compared to the Highland Clearances. ([See: https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/scotland-environment-green-lairds/](https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/scotland-environment-green-lairds/)).

The traditional landowners' views do resonate with many in the local community. Landowners such as Jamie Williamson have been in the area for generations and their staff of land workers-keepers, stalkers, etc- will most likely also be from the Highlands with connections to local communities. The green landowners are seen as outsiders, just like many conservation organisations are. VandeSteege in her research in the Cairngorms found an incredible amount of

hostility among people she met towards the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPVB), even amongst those who expressed a great appreciation of nature and were keen bird watchers. The RSPB and government organisations such as Nature Scotland are seen as ‘southern’ organisations who have “parachuted in” from outside.

However, traditional landowners attacking the new breed is a bit like the pot calling the kettle black. Those landowners who were themselves responsible for the Clearances do not really have the credentials to become champions of the local community. Additionally, VandeSteege found that much of the hostility towards conservation organisations was often whipped up by the landowners themselves. As Roy Dennis, a leading conservationist, said in an interview with her: “I think what you’re picking up as well is that a lot of it is nothing to do with nature conservation; it’s to do with power”. Traditional landowners are finding their power challenged by an alternative elite- and they don’t like it, so they are playing a common game of attacking others to protect their own privileges.

Nevertheless, there is an element of truth in the accusations of the new landowners being outsiders and not knowing or understanding the local community. In Scotland, the vast majority are from abroad, England or from the Central Belt of Scotland. They have come in from elsewhere with a mission, armed with loads of money and bringing along many ‘experts’ to help manage the estate. In mid- Wales, Rewilding Britain, was forced to withdraw from the Summit to the Sea project because it managed to alienate many in the community. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has now taken over and has said “We’ll be working closely with both land and sea stakeholders. It is essential that any project delivers for local people as well as wildlife” <https://www.countytimes.co.uk/news/18526360.rspb-cymru-takes-mid-wales-summit-sea-project/>). The question is will they succeed.

The jury is out as to how much the new breed of landowners will win people over by actually employing locals and involving them in decision-making, but this basic hierarchical model is riddled with flaws that make it inherently elitist.

Neither traditional nor green: community land ownership as an alternative?

Many land justice campaigners look to community ownership as an alternative. This idea is being widely promoted by the Scottish government. This is a popular idea because instead of having a landowner, it would be those who live in the area who would make decisions about how the land was used and managed. The Langholm Initiative is one example that seems to have the potential of providing a real alternative. The impetus and organisation for purchasing the land from the Duke of Buccleuch came from the community itself. They have now invited in others to help and offer advice but these did not dominate decision-making. They have many exciting plans to both transform the degraded grouse moor and provide for increased local livelihoods. (See: <https://www.langholminitiative.org.uk/>).

However, within the current capitalist system, based on social, economic, and political inequality, the model of community land ownership will struggle to be fully participatory with involvement of all. In Langholm, experienced land managers have been employed to run the estate and they themselves admit that participation is often limited to those with more time on their hands. Any community will necessarily have those with more advantages than others whether that be in terms of economic or social and cultural capital. And, communities are not monolithic- there will be a range of views and perspectives and unless mechanisms are put into place to resolve conflict, community buy-outs will not live up to their expectations. Nevertheless, they are certainly a step forward from the current land ownership system.

Ground-up self-organisation: Land as Commons

The green landowners, even those out to do more than cash in on the market for carbon, will have a very small impact on the overall problem of CO₂ emissions. And those who pay lip service to community involvement in decision-making about land are either being deliberately misleading or else misguided. The system of private property itself is at the heart of both ecological and social injustice. As long as land is owned by those whose aim is profit, or by those who became wealthy because of making their millions somewhere else in the capitalist system, then we will not resolve the serious issues facing us.

The only way that both the ecological crisis and social inequality will be tackled is if land is owned, controlled and managed for and by the people. This does not mean State control but a system in which no one actually owns the land- land as a common inheritance.

Further Reading and Sources

Landworkers Alliance: <https://landworkersalliance.org.uk/>

People's Land Policy: www.peopleslandpolicy.org

Guy Shrubsole (2020): Who Owns England?

Website: <https://whoownsengland.org/>

Bonnie VandeSteeg (2021): Land for What? Land for Whom? Senses of Place and Conflict in the Scottish Highlands

Andy Wightman (2015): The Poor Had No Lawyers- Who Owns Scotland (And How They Got It).

Website: <http://www.andywightman.com/>