

## **Empowering communities and restoring nature**

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Scotland's land is steeped in history. Our history has sculpted our landscape by removing both people and trees over time. Our bare landscapes are, to some eyes, beautiful and wild. To others, they are neither of those things. But however we see Scotland's history, it is clear that our future must be different.

To meet the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, how we use our land is fundamental. Right now, it is not fair for humans, or nature.

Rural land ownership in Scotland is today highly concentrated ([who owns Scotland figures](#)): community owned land and environmental charity owned land accounts for less than 3% each and publicly owned land accounts for just less than 12%. Of the remaining 83%, 50% of it is owned by 433 private rural land owners. This means that local communities often do not have the wherewithal or power to influence what happens on their doorstep. The feelings of being overlooked, unimportant and inconsequential are feeding into lively discussions right across Scotland about what should happen where and who should have the final say. This is fundamental to Scotland's Just Transition, and an example can be found [here](#), in Dumfries and Galloway.

Human communities have little say but natural communities of species and habitats – nature – have even less. There is a real crisis in Scotland in our biodiversity – with [Scotland being one of the most nature depleted countries in the world](#). But plants and animals do not speak out as their homes are destroyed, their habitats fragmented and changed beyond a state that meets their needs.

This is what needs to change. We need to work towards a future where local communities, both human and natural, influence what happens to and in the places they live. So what might this look like?

I will not detail here the [Just Transition options](#) Scotland has in front of us to empower local communities. But they must have much more influence and share of not just the natural benefits where they live but the economic and social benefits that come alongside that too.

Instead I will focus on the natural communities, the communities without a voice and whose habitats are today so fragmented and degraded that [1 in 9 species in Scotland is now at risk of extinction](#). How we use our land in the future has a powerful impact on that.

For a start, monocultural use of land is driving those declines. Diversity is a strength. Habitat diversity, habitat mosaics, connections between habitats – nature networks, are what we need if our natural communities are to thrive. This means that when land use is planned and executed, there must always be room for nature: whether that is a series of spaces left for nature, hedgerows to link pieces of woodland, bigger woodlands with open canopies bleeding into grasslands and heathlands, rivers with meandering routes and tree and shrub lined banks. The more diversity we require to be planned into, and delivered by, our land use, the more nature will repay. Whether that is in ecosystems able to retain flood waters, filter rainwater into clean water, healthy soils able to produce healthy food without the need for fertilisers or pesticides, or whether just for the sheer joy of hearing bird song and seeing multi coloured carpets of flowers: introducing diversity back into our landscape makes us more resilient into the future. It also ensures that future generations have the chance to enjoy what we enjoy.

Scotland's future is about creating a legacy that is worth having where land is used for the many and not the few, both humans and nature. This is a just land use system that creates homes for wildlife, provides the ecosystem services we need and builds joyful places for us to be.

Getting there is not easy but having this clear vision for Scotland's people to buy into is fundamental. Who doesn't want to see woodland spangled with flowers and ringing with bird song? Who doesn't want to see healthy grasslands, buzzing with life and changing kaleidoscopically through the seasons?

To get there we need to protect responsible access, to support farmers and land managers to do more for nature, to require businesses in forestry to build nature into their plans, to protect what's left and help it expand and to enable communities to have a say in what happens on their doorsteps through effective and fundamental land reform. We can only do this together, with coordinated land policy able to deliver our vision.