

Land, stewardship, and community

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Over the last couple of years, I've spent a lot of time in Liguria, northern Italy, where you can walk for hundreds of miles without coming across a single fence — maybe just the odd strand of temporary electric tape. There's very little visible sign of who owns what.

The land there is split into small parcels, held by thousands of different people. The maps of ownership form a dense, beautiful patchwork. People still grow food, raise animals, cut hay, manage woods. More than 60% of the region is forest, much of it naturally regenerated. There are hunting rights, foraging rights, protected zones. And what really stands out — apart from the lack of fences — is that no one interest or estate dominates.

Because the land is so widely held, it doesn't feel captured by the usual pressures of power or speculation. It's so loosely connected to wealth that it can seem almost incidental. I've heard of people buying houses and discovering the deal included an olive grove or a hillside of forest.

But it's not just about ownership. Each cluster of villages has its own municipality, with a mayor and local powers over services and taxes. That means real, local control. It's not a rural utopia. It's just everyday life.

That close-knit relationship between people, place, and decision-making shows that other ways are possible. It got me thinking about what land reform in Scotland could look like. And, as usual, I ended up with more questions than answers:

Can we imagine a future where everyone who wants to access land can do so easily?

What if land in Scotland was defined not by who owns it, but by who looks after it?

What if rights to land came with expectations — not just responsibilities — to communities, to nature, to future generations?

Could we create a culture where communities help shape land decisions, even if they don't hold the title deeds?

How do we decentralise democracy and governance, so decisions are made closer to the people and places they affect?

Could the right to a healthy environment become a foundation of our planning system and rural economy?

Could landowners be required to collaborate — with each other, with communities, and with the land itself?

In the Glenkens, where I live, we've started exploring this. We created a Land Use Vision based on local values. At its heart is a simple idea:

"Everyone who takes value from the land gives something back to it."

It's about give and take. About finding ways for people and land to thrive together.

This principle is now part of our Community Action Plan and is being taken into Local Place Plans. But whether it actually shapes decisions still depends on how planners, officials, landowners and government respond. Will they work with it — or work around it?

To change that, communities need more than just consultation. We need to be at the heart of decision-making. That means real collaboration, not top-down policies. It means building relationships that are grounded, practical, and rooted in place.

Giving back at least as much as we take. Thriving together — humans in the living world. If we want a future that works, these can't just be nice ideas. They need to guide how we use and share land.

We're past the point of waiting. Fixing our damaged soils, cleaning our rivers, restoring ecosystems — these could be shared national goals. And the evidence is growing, when local people are involved in looking after the land they live on, the outcomes are stronger, more lasting, and more meaningful than anything delivered from a distance.

Access to land is often restricted by who can afford it or who holds the power to decide its use. But land isn't just a commodity — it's the foundation of our communities and our future. Everyone should have the right to secure space where they can grow, build, and live. In many places, people who want to farm, create small businesses, or simply live sustainably struggle to find affordable land. We could change this. Land could be a basic right for everyone who is willing to care for it and the future it holds.

Around the world — and in our own past — we can find other ways of living with land. Not just as property, but as something we share responsibility for. Countless small stories of care and connection. They remind us that the way we live with land isn't fixed. It's something we shape together, through culture, policy, imagination, and care.

Scotland can be a place where looking after land matters more than owning it. Where land is shared, not hoarded. Where communities help shape the decisions that shape their lives. And where belonging to the land is no longer the exception, but the norm.