

Written evidence from the Scottish Gamekeepers Association

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA), although not invited to consult prior to the publication of the recent Land Reform Review Group report and its recommendations, wishes to put forward the thoughts and concerns of its members.

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association represents 5300 gamekeepers, stalkers, land and river ghillies, wildlife managers and rangers. Although our membership is not large in comparison to the Scottish population as a whole, our members, their families and extended networks comprise a significant proportion of the rural workforce and current dwelling population of some of Scotland's most remote areas.

Whilst a portion of our members are country sports enthusiasts, most work the land and manage its wildlife and habitat daily, over significant land areas. For many their occupation, like crofters, is inter-generational.

It must be noted at the outset that, although many of our members are employed by estates, we do not represent either estates, their owners, factors or lairds. The SGA was set up to represent the working people of the countryside; their jobs and conditions, and to defend their interests in the face of threats to both.

Our members and their forebears have tended the land and habitat of Scotland for centuries, often in isolation, during unsociable hours and for relatively low pay. For them it is a way of life. There is a great deal of pride taken in being part of Scotland's history and culture and also producing bountiful returns in terms of nature. Much of the wildlife for which Scotland is renowned has been managed down the years by gamekeepers, stalkers, ghillies and wildlife managers. From the salmon and trout in the rivers to the ptarmigan and blue hare on the high tops, the habitat work and legal predator control has allowed an abundance of species to thrive. These hardy individuals have served Scotland and the UK well in peacetime and in wartime; a number making up the enviable battalion, the Lovat Scouts. They have helped Police by maintaining a watch over the countryside, they often assist mountain rescue and fire service operations in remote parts. The SGA has been an active partner to government in ensuring skills and training are progressed when it comes to the countryside. The SGA helped draw up the Access code, Deer Best Practice guidelines and are an approved body for the delivery of snare training and deer management qualifications.

In short, there could be no doubts that the work of our members is undertaken in the spirit of the common good, way over and above any personal financial gain.

While some of the recommendations in the recent report would be supported by the SGA (it is our view that how an estate is managed is the true test of its worth, whether it is owned by the state, a private landowner, Forestry Commission Scotland or the RSPB over 10 acres or 500 000) our members have significant and legitimate fears also.

These fears are, principally, for jobs and wildlife.

The recommendations largely focus on redistributing land and the legal levers and other mechanisms which can be brought to bear to facilitate such redistribution. In

the rural context, the clear line of travel in the report is towards reducing the size of land held in private hands. The report is detailed when it comes to accountability private owners should have for using land in the common good yet not so thorough when imposing similar conditions upon state or community-held land or the significant amount of land owned by groups such as RSPB, National Trust for Scotland or John Muir Trust.

In our view, therefore, the recommendations, if implemented in full, will discourage private investment in Scotland's countryside. This may be one of the intentions. Rights of purchase and caps on holdings will weaken confidence from private investors, who will, in all likelihood, choose to invest their money in countries where conditions are more favourable and attitudes warmer. It would then be up to the state, through tax payers, to make up for the loss of investment in rural areas. At a time when Scotland must choose its own future, this could prove a weighty burden.

Whilst reducing the role and influence of private investors may be one of the aims, we feel the report's authors have not fully considered the impacts this will have on rural workers currently employed in, and living in, remote areas. The working gamekeeper, who relies on an estate wage to keep his house and the kids at the local school, will not be well served by recommendations limiting his income source. Indeed, there is a very strong argument to suggest that those who will suffer the consequences are the working people who have been such an integral part of Scottish rural life, not the owners who can take their money elsewhere.

As an organisation we have asked Ministers on a number of occasions for reassurances that our members' jobs would be safeguarded or fully considered. We have received no satisfactory assurance. The report considers that the recommendations could give rise to possible greater community benefit. In our view, there are too few cohesive plans put forward to do this, although this is something we would always be supportive of. We doubt there will be a surfeit of buyers for high land only a gamekeeper could produce a harvest from. We also question the correctness of funnelling public money from priority areas such as schools, hospitals and providing homes and jobs for young people, to assist communities in buying such land. The last thing we would want to see is for a programme purporting to assist a working countryside and rural re-population, unwittingly or otherwise, actually achieving the opposite and clearing working people once again from rural areas.

In the absence of assurances regarding our members' jobs, the SGA has grave concerns for Scotland's wildlife in the future.

Like economies of scale in finances, when land holdings become more fragmented, it makes it more difficult to manage for the benefit of a diversity of species at catchment scale. Ireland and Wales are relevant examples. In both countries, rural land has been broken up, over time, into smaller units. Those owning these parcels of land, quite rightly, are concerned principally with their livelihoods. There is no incentive to manage for the benefit of the other wildlife on that holding. Where gamekeepers work to conserve game species over large areas, there are quantifiable benefits for other flora and fauna (which have been well researched and published). There is an incentive for this management and a broad suite of wildlife is the net overall gain. Unless there is a continuity of management during or after any

proposed change or break-up of land, wildlife will not cope on its own. Wading birds, for example, are all but extinct in Ireland because the incentive to control predators has been removed. Similarly, in some areas of Scotland, where there are large forestry blocks owned by Forestry Commission Scotland, predator control is not carried out as this is not a primary function on that holding. We know from experience that this can have a devastating impact on land, wildlife and livestock held by neighbours, particularly when the fox population rises.

If it is accepted that the break-up of estates, the contraction of private investment and/or the failure of public expenditure to match such costs would result in the loss of gamekeeping jobs, we believe this will have a catastrophic affect on the wildlife and landscape for which Scotland is renowned internationally. We give two pertinent and well researched contemporary examples to justify this view.

Buccleuch Estate land at Langholm in the Borders once comprised one of the most successful grouse moors in the world. Following a period where large predators continually built up on the ground, the number of these predators finally led to the collapse of the moor as a viable sporting entity in 1995.

As a direct result, gamekeepers lost their jobs. Predator and heather management ceased immediately. When gamekeepers were brought back onto the moor to assist with the Langholm Moor Demonstration Project, scientists gathered the data from the intervening period. During the period in which there were no gamekeepers, the population of wading birds at Langholm declined by 75 per cent. The Hen Harrier numbers also dropped from 28 to 2 after keepers were removed; Hen Harriers also being ground-nesting birds. Langholm Moor remains unviable today, despite significant investment, a portion of which comes from the Scottish taxpayer.

The second example is Berwyn in Wales. A study of the Berwyn Special Protection Area (SPA) in North Wales by GWCT analysed the trends of upland birds between 1983 and 2002 when grouse shooting ceased, gamekeepers were removed, and it became a National Nature Reserve (NNR).

Formerly a rich grouse shooting area, the NNR is run by Countryside Council for Wales, with the largest block at Severn Trent Water operated as a bird reserve by RSPB.

During the study period- in which grouse moor management stopped- lapwing became extinct, golden plover declined from 10 birds to one and curlew declined 79 per cent.

Red grouse declined 54 per cent, Hen Harrier numbers crashed 50 per cent, black grouse declined by 78 per cent and now 75 per cent of Wales' surviving black grouse population exists on the one remaining kept moor at Berwyn.

Failure to listen to the views of those who have managed Scotland's rural landscape and its many species of wildlife for hundreds of years, we believe, will be a costly mistake. Similarly, we believe, the failure to preserve the jobs of practical wildlife managers, in any drive to reform, could be disastrous, with impacts on rural employment, community cohesion, international tourism and the country's natural heritage. The report recommendations, for example, proposes an 'ambitious

programme of land acquisitions in rural Scotland, as part of delivering multiple public interest policy objectives'. Practical land managers know that the National Forestry Strategy's aim of increased afforestation in Scotland from 17 per cent to 25 per cent by 2050, if implemented, will cause environmental damage if it means (and it would have to) tree planting on carbon rich moorland. Similarly, such an increase in forestation will have a serious impact on golden eagle populations, as is already being seen in the south of Scotland. A clear demonstration of 'public interest' would have to be made, here. This would also have to apply to any future statutory wild fishery body which would be accountable for balancing our wild fish resources with the stated aim of expanding a fish farm industry, 80 per cent foreign-owned, which is failing to comply with acceptable environmental standards.

In short, without considering the views of practical land managers, there is too much at stake. The financial costs to Scotland, also, of making such a mistake, could be considerable. None of our members, proud of their role in what has been achieved- and could be achieved- in Scotland's rural areas, would want this.

Gamekeepers warned SNH many years before the publicly funded body undertook an expensive control programme of hedgehogs in the Uists that there was a requirement to control the numbers immediately to provide a balance for other species. The advice from practical land managers was ignored and the millions of pounds of costs to the public purse- and the local wildlife- of this delay, is now well documented. Gamekeepers have provided, over many years, for free, what it has taken over £10 million of tax payers' money to achieve through conservation groups in terms of red squirrel survival (culling of greys) and mink removal.

We sincerely hope the views of our working members will be considered carefully in all future deliberations on the Review Group's recommendations.

We would be happy to assist, as ever, Scottish government as they assess the way ahead for Land Reform in Scotland.