

Chairman – SGA AGM 1st March 2024– Key Messages

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today. I am delighted to be here and delighted that our NatureScot Chief Executive, Francesca Osowska, and other NatureScot staff are here along with me. I hope this shows that we are keen to talk, to listen, and to engage with you now and in the coming months and years.

Nature- climate

- We face a nature-climate crisis globally and here in Scotland we are all already seeing changes in our climate, with more intense storms, more heavy rain events and in some parts of the country longer dry periods. Our environment is changing in response, and the timing, synchrony and alignments of “natural” events is becoming strained. We must act on this, building on what we have done so far.
- We can act positively. The vision of reducing emissions to zero by 2045, and substantially regenerating nature by the same year will be fundamental to a thriving Scotland – to nature, to our economy and to our collective wellbeing. We will all be enriched by nature restored, we will be stronger in the face of the impacts of climate change, and we will have made a “just” contribution to tackling the emergency.
- First, we must stop the decline in biodiversity by 2030 and cut emissions by three quarters by 2030. How we use and manage the land and sea will be crucial to success. Change to the way we do things is necessary.
- I have, over recent months tried to capture this need for action by calling for a new “Partnership for Nature” and I repeat that again today.
- You all have a key role to play in addressing this crisis. It might have become an overused phrase, but the threat from climate change and nature loss is very real.
- You manage the land and the species which live on it. This crisis will impact on you, the land, and the species that you are managing, and will affect the lifestyle you care about.
- There is no doubt that these global challenges demand changes to the way our land is managed.
- But change has to be built on understanding, otherwise it risks causing more harm than good. You can help make these changes work, but we need to work with you to take that step.

Public opinion

- Public opinion is very important to us all, and there is a keen public interest in nature and in how we manage the land. As a public agency we are acutely aware of the importance and need for public scrutiny of the decisions we take.

This is also especially true for Ministers who must be aware of where general opinion lies. That doesn't mean we and they must (or indeed, always) follow that wider opinion, but it must always be part of our, and probably of your, assessment when major decisions have to be taken.

- It is important to state and that I am clear - NatureScot will support management where nature is benefitting through good gamekeeping, conducted within the law on the land that you manage.
- Importantly, there is more of an expectation from the public that management of the Scottish landscape will give increased benefits and that access to these great areas is critical for our wider mental health, physical health, and overall wellbeing.
- Yes, that expectation will bring challenge to you - but if you get it right you can harness the opportunity - to lead this change – to, shape it and importantly, make money from it.

Trust & Truthfulness

- We know that we will have difficult discussions ahead but a healthy partnership between us all recognises this and works through it.
- It important to acknowledge and respect the different opinions and positions that others hold.

Being clear -

- Your skills and future actions can provide real local benefits whether employment, food, habitat management, or access, - so engage with your communities and the wider population to promote how your skills and knowledge can support sustainable land management.

Let me now look briefly into the future and how pivotal your role with all your skills and knowledge could be:

- Conservation and nature recovery needs the specific wildlife management skills that you have.
- All good natural science is built on observation, and you have that in buckets. You are out working every day and have an intimate understanding of the natural world.
- We need to think about how you we can marshal this, standardise it and use it as part of the wider decision-making processes that will inform the future management of the land and of species across Scotland.
- This may mean developing new skills in how these observations can be collated into long runs of data, sentinel sites and using technology (apps) to

assist. We are already exploring such approaches with the farming community, and it would be good to trial this with you as well.

- There is an expanding role here for SGA and its membership; providing the leadership that encourages, promotes, and delivers training and continual professional development.
- Don't look just within your current membership, however, take your training out across the land management sector and this includes to the eNGOs.

Turning now to some of the key areas of your work, let me say a few words about each.

Salmon

- There are real challenges in maintaining and enhancing wild salmon populations across the country, but they are a key part of our rivers and we do need to help. There is a clear, common agenda in helping the species survive and the rivers it depends on to thrive.
-
- Some may consider it a difficult argument - that we can keep catching an endangered species, but NatureScot does get it and of course supporting population restoration is a key part of the action for the future.
- The salmon issue and the ecosystem factors involved are complex! We do need to have good clear examples to show how management can benefit the species and to identify clearly where different issues are impacting or are not, working.
- We can help you identify and work through examples where contradictory policies are colliding, but it is important to recognise where the tensions are, and to use good evidence support action.

Grouse

- I know that the legislation around how grouse moors are managed is changing and that there are new challenges for you but there are opportunities as well.
- Showing that grouse moor management can adapt with new techniques (cutting v burning perhaps being the main one, but also careful burning to avoid riparian areas)
- Helping to develop and adhering to codes, indeed the co-design of such approaches is a key area for us working together in future.
- Demonstrating and evidencing competence and skills in managing land and species.
- Making sure that persecution of birds of prey is so "last century" and patiently, working on legal predator control.

- Encouraging greater diversity of habitats within the moorland landscape.
- Fully quantifying the benefits of effective management to ground nesting birds,
- Provide leadership across the landscape scale building on the Moorland Groups

Deer

- There are, of course, differences between the traditional deer forest and the need to significantly reduce herbivore impacts to enhance the overall diversity of the uplands and to help maintain wider ecosystem processes.
- Such tensions in deer management are not new however, (between grouse managers and deer managers or between the call for increasing riparian woodland for salmon and the need to reduce deer numbers in response), so managing this and moving forward is not new - but this is a key part of our collective effort for the coming years – to find a new “balance” and way of working that will help nature, help the economy and that will place keepers at the centre of the work.
- It will be different from now but as stalkers your skills and knowledge are part of the solution.
- Let's work together to embrace that change.

So, in conclusion what does the future look like? How do we all achieve a new “Just Transition partnership”?

- Firstly, it is important to recognise that the benefits of tackling the nature-climate crisis are spread across the population, whilst there is a short-term risk that the impacts focus on specific groups and are potentially severe in some cases.
- The best way to ensure that benefits reach keepers and others working in rural Scotland, is to work together in partnership on delivering the solutions and I would suggest that the work on peatland restoration going on across the country is one example of such mutual benefit, helping nature, tackling climate change, and getting money into upland management in a new and innovative way.

For NatureScot, we seek a renewed partnership, driven by a commitment to:

- nature recovery,
- food production and
- support for an important part of the wider economy.

All three can and must be taken forward together.

- Change is inevitable and necessary, however, – we cannot keep doing what we have done, in the way we have done it.
- Land value has changed; and new landowners may not have the same sporting objectives.
- Irrespective, those new ‘kids on the block’ will need the skills and knowledge that gamekeepers and wildlife managers provide, in order to deliver and maximise their investments.
- We want to work with you to promote your skills and knowledge, indeed your presence on the land, is an important element of the rural landscape.
- It is important and timely to identify ~~(but not over claim)~~ how these skills contribute beyond the core of delivering shooting / field sports. But to do that we all need to be prepared to play and accept that change is the new norm.
- I know that I have outlined many new approaches and developing issues today, but I know that you can rise to these challenges, and I hope that we can form a new “partnership for nature” in helping you to take forward the management of land and of our precious species across Scotland.

Thank you.

Ends