

# The Future of the Natural Environment after the EU Referendum

## A submission to the Environmental Audit Committee from Shared Assets

### 1. Introduction

1.1 Shared Assets is delighted to make this submission to the Environmental Audit Committee, and welcomes the attention it is giving to such an important subject at such a crucial time. We would welcome the opportunity to come and explain our thoughts and ideas to the committee in more detail.

1.2 Shared Assets ([www.sharedassets.org.uk](http://www.sharedassets.org.uk)) is a think and do tank that supports people managing land for the common good. At Shared Assets we believe that land is a common resource that should deliver shared benefits for everyone. We provide practical advice, support and training to landowners and communities who want to manage land as a sustainable and productive asset. We also undertake research, policy and advocacy work to help create an environment where common good models of land management can flourish.

### 2. Executive summary

2.1 The potential implications of leaving the EU are huge, and UK will now have to address environmental policy making for the first time in many years. We believe there are significant opportunities to create a new, replenishing relationship between people and the environment, by considering the future of land use in its fullest sense. The creation of a better, more ambitious and more sustainable agri-environment subsidy scheme could be one of the most important expressions of this.

2.2 Our position can be summed up in a few brief points:

- The key principle of any renewed subsidy scheme should be *public money for public goods*
- Too often, discussion and debate about agricultural policy focuses on single issues - either the business model of farming, or the biodiversity impacts, for example. We believe that a successful approach to considering land use and management must consider key sectors like agriculture but also recognise that land management has important implications for public health, recreation and community cohesion. Land use must be understood in relation to its potential to contribute to social value.
- There is an opportunity to create a more regional and local approach to sustainable land use and to food economies. Any system of subsidy needs to be backed up by a robust and nuanced governance and administration structure that recognises both social value and local and regional contexts.
- We need a national conversation about what land should be for and how it should be managed and paid for. We need mechanisms that allow people to have a say in how land in their area or region should be used.

- In our view, the concept of Common Good Land Use offers a way of thinking about what land should be for. Any future subsidy system should support land use which:
  - Creates livelihoods
  - Enriches the environment
  - Produces the things people need
  - Creates shared environmental, social and economic benefits
  - Offers community control
  - Contributes towards a more sustainable society

2.3 The bulk of our submission will be in response to the committee's questions around the structure, administration and outcomes of any future agri-environment scheme/s.

### **3. How should future support for UK agriculture be structured in order to ensure there are incentives for environmentally-friendly land management?**

*In general:*

3.1 Land use is of national, strategic importance and has huge impact at a local level. Any system that incentivises particular types of land use needs to consider its local, regional and national implications.

3.2 A key, national decision needs to be made about what the purpose of land in the UK should be. For example, is the aim of UK agriculture self-sufficiency or near self-sufficiency in food production? Is a sustainable, high employment rural economy more important than maximising the profitability of individual farms? It will be easier to answer questions about the structure and purpose of public subsidy of certain land uses if there is clarity around what land use should be delivering for society.

3.3 We need to make sure that subsidies are appropriate to regional contexts. This could be achieved by a set of light touch regional governance structures that coordinate strategic support and subsidy for land use within the framework of the national policy. This could be by supporting particular types of land use or crop, or dealing with particular risks, like flooding. This would align subsidies with particular social outcomes, as opposed to the current system of paying landowners simply for owning land.

3.4 There therefore needs to be a national conversation, commission, or enquiry about the future of UK land and we would urge the committee to consider facilitating this.

*In particular:*

3.5 A crucial failure of the current system is the size restriction that means that many small farms and smallholdings are not eligible for subsidy. Many of these smaller farms will be using environmentally friendly farming methods as a matter of course, with no recompense. For example, organisations such as [Organic Lea](#), [Tamar Grow Local](#) and the [Ecological Land Co-operative](#) are creating huge social, environmental and economic value, yet receive no land-use subsidies.

3.6 Natural capital accounting may offer a way of recognising environmental and social benefits that are poorly compensated by the market, and thereby support a greater diversity of approaches and ownership models (such as co-operatives and social enterprises) in the agricultural sector.

#### **4. How should future UK agri-environment support be administered, and what outcomes should it focus on?**

4.1 We believe that principles of Common Good Land Use should form the basis of the outcomes any future agri-environment support should focus on. Clearly, identifying the ‘common good’ for land use will require a great deal of thought, however we believe the most important principles are that land use should:

4.2 **Create livelihoods:** Land use should create meaningful livelihoods for those who work on and manage land. We need to support models that enable farmers to earn a living and entrepreneurs to generate enough income to run their businesses sustainably. This may well look different in different parts of the country. And a good livelihood may be dependent on more than just wages, for example providing access to sustainable agricultural dwellings is key. There is no one model of “sustainable” farming.

4.3 **Enrich the environment:** Land management, as a matter of course, should enrich (rather than simply maintain) the environment and biodiversity. Thus mixed crop and diverse farms need more support, to counter the damaging effects of mono-crop approaches. Use of pesticides should be minimised and agro-ecological approaches supported. The use of neonicotinoids and other demonstrably harmful chemicals should render a farm ineligible for public subsidy.

4.4 **Produce the things people need:** Land must be productive, but this should not be understood as simply maximising revenue. Subsidies should support the production of healthy food and sustainable building materials, but also social and environmental services and outcomes, such as health, education, and recreation.

4.5 **Create shared benefits:** Subsidies should incentivise land use where the economic and social benefits are shared among communities. This might be through increased access to land for new entrants to farming, or for community-led projects, high quality local employment, flood prevention measures or the provision of affordable food and energy.

4.6 **Offer community control:** Communities should be able to engage with the land around them. We should encourage land management that engages communities, and gives them a say in how their local natural resources are managed. A more transparent subsidy system and more freely

available information on who owns the land around them and how it is managed would help achieve this. A sense of community control will reinforce citizenship and local pride.

**4.7 Contributing towards a more sustainable society:** New models of land use have the potential to address some of society's biggest issues, from housing to health to climate change. We should encourage models of land use that offer new solutions to entrenched problems, and not settle for "business as usual". Land is a non-renewable resource and we need a system for managing and making decisions about it which is fit for the 21st century.

## **5. What are the future risks and opportunities to innovative land practices, such as managed rewilding? What role can rewilding play in conservation and restoration of habitats and wildlife? What evidence is there to support the incentivising of such schemes in any new land management policies?**

**5.1** Rewilding and other similar ideas are useful concepts but we believe care needs to be taken over their implementation and design. The re-introduction of certain species (such as beavers) into particular ecosystems may be extremely useful, but it will still need to be a managed process. Whilst elements of rewilding, in particular the idea of restoring more naturally self managing and self sustaining ecosystems, should be further explored it is important not to romanticise the idea of 'wilderness', something that may be very hard to meaningfully restore in the UK given our long history of active land management, agriculture and domestication. .

**5.2** Agro-ecological and permaculture-informed farming methods may offer a more immediate and evidence based approach to improving biodiversity and other environmental outcomes.

## **6. Conclusion**

**6.1** We would like to thank the committee for taking the time to read our submission and would look forward to coming and discussing these ideas with you more fully.

**6.2** Our key message is that land and its use and management are fundamental issues that need to be fully considered. Leaving the EU offers the UK a rare opportunity to reflect on the purpose of our land, and to redesign a system of public support for its management that achieves benefits for society, the economy and the wider environment.