

Lairds, Land and Sustainability: Scottish Perspectives on Upland Management

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Lairds, Land and Sustainability: Scottish Perspectives on Upland Management

Edited by Jayne Glass, Martin F. Price, Charles Warren, and Alister Scott. Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Edinburgh University Press, 2013, xviii + 238 pp. £ 24.99. ISBN 978-0-7486-4590-9.

This book provides a synthesis of research carried out at the Centre for Mountain Studies at Perth College, University of the Highlands and Islands, Scotland, on the sustainability of “traditional” upland management in the Scottish Highlands. In this work, based largely on original PhD research, the authors seek to explore the most important challenges and opportunities for sustainability from social, natural, economic, and political perspectives, using research tools that generated both quantitative and qualitative data.

The controversial history of land use in the Scottish Highlands has been well covered elsewhere, and this book represents a refreshing academic take on the sustainability of land use from the perspective of traditional land holdings (“sporting estates”) and new forms of ownership under conservation nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the John Muir Trust, and local community groups. Rather than dwelling on the extensively researched legacy of the past, the authors thankfully focus on the present challenges of sustainable management in the Scottish uplands. At the same time, the book is extremely well grounded in the broader academic literature, and there is extensive citing of previous research in the Scottish Highlands that gives the historical perspective.

The book is divided into 4 parts and 9 chapters. Part I describes sustainability in terms of key

concepts and introduces the ecosystem approach to land management. Part II explores sustainability from a private land ownership perspective, which, in the Scottish uplands, is largely dominated by sporting interests—that is, “sport” in the sense of hunting (deer), shooting (grouse and pheasant), and fishing (salmon). Landowner motivation rightly receives considerable attention, as many estate owners in Scotland appear to be more interested in personal sporting opportunities than in generating profit from their land holdings. The relationship between landowners and the local community is also in focus, especially in relation to some of the more locally contentious issues of employment, housing, and community involvement. Part III explores these and other issues from the perspective of nonprivate ownership in the form of local community groups (Chapter 6) and conservation NGOs (Chapter 7). The former have benefited from policy support in terms of loans and grants from the Scottish government over the past decade, but the underlying driver has been the long-running conflict that has existed in certain locales between local people and unsympathetic private owners who, more often than not, were absentee landlords who managed their land with insufficient regard to the local community. The authors look to the future in Part IV. In Chapter 8, Glass describes a sustainability tool for managing upland estates that encompasses 5 principles of sustainability: adapting management, broadening options, ecosystem thinking, linking into social fabric, and thinking beyond the estate. The book concludes with a chapter on lessons learned for future sustainable management.

Overall, this book is a welcome addition to the research literature on the sustainability of upland ownership and management in a Westernized society, providing an excellent

summary of the key challenges faced in the Scottish Highlands today. At a broader scale, the book may appeal to researchers interested in applied land use research as a means of exploring sustainability in a coherent way.

On the negative side, the book’s structure is rather unimaginative, revolving around chapters focusing on the different ownership regimes, rather than issues or processes affecting land use and management. Although this is understandable in view of the book’s *raison d’être*, it tends to inhibit the intellectual scope for exploring underlying processes and drivers of management and ownership (eg social change, power and networks, governance, and government policy). As a consequence, the book treats some issues rather superficially, and fails to acknowledge the broader themes that would help the book resonate more with global debates and an international audience. I also find it odd, given the book’s structure, that the authors ignore public land ownership, especially the role of the Forestry Commission, an organization that, in total, owns more land in upland Scotland than any other, private or public. There are also some oddities in terms of terminology—for example, the authors do not give a convincing explanation for adopting the term “uplands” as opposed to the more obvious and recognizable term “the Scottish Highlands,” which appears to be the geographic focus of the book.

Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to the applied literature on the sustainability of land management and ownership systems, and gives an excellent contemporary account of the land use scene in the Scottish uplands. Given the ambitious nature of any body of work aspiring to address sustainability, there is much that necessarily could not be covered in this book—for example, the problems of

overgrazing by deer, the debate over wilderness and rewilding, the challenges of climate change, and the pursuit of renewable energy are all underrepresented. As such, this book is therefore perhaps best read and considered alongside other work

describing contemporary applied research on these topics in the Scottish uplands.

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