



**I have been involved in a lot of conversations lately about the future of land and what it should be used for. You can't get away from it. It is in every meeting, every news report. It crops up in phone conversations and on social media. It is constant.**

Funnily, it was only when I got a minute to step back and think about it that I realised the only people who I had heard talking about the wildlife in all this were the gamekeepers.

There are online 3 day conferences taking place just now (£450 a delegate) on land values and carbon off-setting. Factor agencies are falling over themselves to tell landowners how they can access 'green finance'. But, unless it has been an NGO mentioning nature in crisis in a bid to tap yet more public cash to save whatever they claim to be saving next, there has been no genuine talk about wildlife- other than from gamekeepers!

The rest seem to be too focused on how they can be cashing in.

Who is asking the questions about whether mass tree planting projects are going to displace open habitat species? Who is asking for better ways of ensuring wildlife is considered when big land use changes are being transacted?

I'll tell you... it is us.

Maybe someone will realise the irony in that.

Our opponents would have everyone believe that gamekeepers were unthinking murderers of all wildlife. Our skilled predator management is now dressed up by campaigners as 'casual killing'.

But, here we are...focused on the wildlife.

No one reflects on how our late nights at fox management helped the supermarket shelves remain stocked of quality Scottish lamb during the pandemic or how our trapping expertise might just give the Curlew a chance of global survival when it is predicted Wales will lose all theirs in 12 years' time.

When the public money chest begins to open and everyone is rushing around trying to make sure they get the cake, we are the gatekeepers worried about the wildlife. The folk that have managed the land and the rivers for well over a century. Who would have thought it?

I remember visiting Southern Ireland. I was speaking to a taxidermist friend on a train who told me the amount of foxes they managed in a year. It was a significant number. Elsewhere, very little was being done. The land I saw was small pockets of lovely green habitat, rows of hedges. It was beautiful; the sort of habitats conservationists are singing about.

But there was nothing there. No wee birds. The predators had had a field day. This is the stuff too many don't understand.

Personally, I feel that, if the boxes are being ticked on projects involving millions, there needs to be a plan for species management, built in, to keep vulnerable wildlife, or it is all going to go.

Believe it or not, gamekeepers like me care about this sort of thing. It keeps us awake.

In Scotland, we have projects such as Cairngorms Connect where they have this vision to join up vast areas of habitat. They are saying that this will allow wildlife to flourish but there is very little wildlife management other than to reduce deer numbers to well below the natural carrying capacity of the land. That is all very well but it could equally be renamed 'Predator Connect' because it will also open up vast connected areas for them, too, spelling trouble for more vulnerable species (see P29-31).

I believe we, as land managers, are the lynchpins when it comes to addressing the loss of biodiversity. Maybe that is why we are the only ones talking about it?

Finally, I want to talk about mental health.

Like other aspects touched on in this column, people have perceptions of gamekeepers which have been pushed by opponents and NGOs for decades. Some of the online hate, which originated from a few blog sites, has been extreme. I believe this, and the persistent nature of legislative changes the sector has constantly had to broach, has impacted how people working in our sector, feel. Justified criticism is one thing but there are a great many people who feel that we have moved beyond that and perspective has been lost and I have sympathy with that view.

Recently, we lost two young members of our community. Who knows the anguish these individuals felt and all the causes? However, the environment we are operating in has not helped confidence in the sector and threatens the work which organisations such as ours and the colleges have done in attempting to get young people into gamekeeping and wildlife management; important routes into rural employment.

We all have a role to play in ensuring people feel supported. We should be mindful of the moods and problems of colleagues and encourage people to reach out, if they need help, to wonderful, and discrete organisations such as Gamekeepers Welfare Trust.

Helen and the team there do a wonderful job and we, at the SGA, are proud to support them.