

# The Birds & The Bees: OFC 2018

**Should farmers/the farming industry do more to protect wildlife?**

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(These are my personal views and do not represent the views of Natural England)

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 0900 5<sup>th</sup> JAN 2018**

The three second answer has to be Yes - how could it be anything else given 70% of our land area is farmed and the State of Nature is declining. It would be bizarre to deny the correlation and causation between some farming methods, species extinction and habitat degradation.

The 3 min answer is; "It depends; farmers can do more and will do more if and when they are properly motivated, supported and valued by those who benefit from our biodiversity, beautiful landscapes, clean water and cultural heritage. My focus today is on the 8000 plus farmers in the hills and on the commons of England. Iconic people looking after our iconic landscapes.

Current payments to the English uplands from Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 are approximately £240 million per year and with over 70 million visits each year to the Uplands the cost to the tax payer equates to ~£3.30 per visit. This strikes me as immensely good value when you think what people spend on a cream tea let alone a Gortex jacket. We accept the principle of using general taxation to pay for the public benefits from schools, libraries and hospitals etc. so why not to provide the public benefits from our countryside? 70% of our drinking water comes from the uplands, it is a huge sink for carbon and we know the natural capital of biodiversity is economically valuable. But yes more could and should be done by farmers.

I remember in 2014 when many of us were debating the modulation rate - one organisation put enormous effort into reducing that from 15% to 12%; my personal view then, and now, is that 100% is the appropriate modulation rate. I can see no justification for paying people simply for owning or renting land and complying with the law. It is not good for the image of farming and does a disservice to the tens of thousands of farmers who work tirelessly to steward our environment while producing good quality food.

That doesn't mean I think the £3 billion cake should shrink - rather it should be distributed differently.

And it is not only me who thinks it is time for a new covenant between farmers and Society. The Uplands Alliance has met with over 300 people in four workshops and the collective view was that the Uplands are a) really special and b) that public money ought to be used to pay to provide and enhance the public benefits from the Uplands. As one commoner on a moor in Durham said to me; “Julia, they’re closing Alzheimer clinics in Newcastle - and they’re still paying us; we need to provide something for our money.”

So far I am encouraged by the direction of travel. Commons and the Uplands offer so much potential that we can unlock. For instance 21% of our SSSI area is common land despite commons only being 3% of England. Common Land is 7x more important for biodiversity than other land. I am therefore delighted that Defra are keen to pilot new types of schemes in the next few years during the ‘transition period’ so that can test the specific needs of different agricultural systems. In particular commons can help inform the development of multi-partite agreements between farmers which are so necessary to deliver landscape and catchment scale benefits.

Similarly across the uplands there is a higher level of tenanted land than in the lowlands. Future policies and schemes need to reflect these extra dimensions so that farmers are motivated through appropriate drivers to deliver a wide range of public goods. This will also increase the resilience of their businesses, an area where the Prince’s Countryside Fund does so much good work.

We need to recognise that many of the businesses that deliver our most spectacular landscapes are financially vulnerable and these businesses are their homes as well. It is nonsensical to suggest that because hill farms are uneconomic without government support they should be left to go out of business. No one expects the V&A to break even without public support, or for their staff to work for under the living wage; we should not expect the same for the farmers who manage the countryside for millions of people’s recreation and refreshment. Let’s collectively offer society a positive proposition through better supporting the iconic people who look after our iconic landscapes to do more for wildlife. For me this involves 1) co-design and ownership of environmental outcomes 2) explicitly joining the dots in contracts between payments and public benefits, and 3) effective scheme governance, monitoring and self-assessment.

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