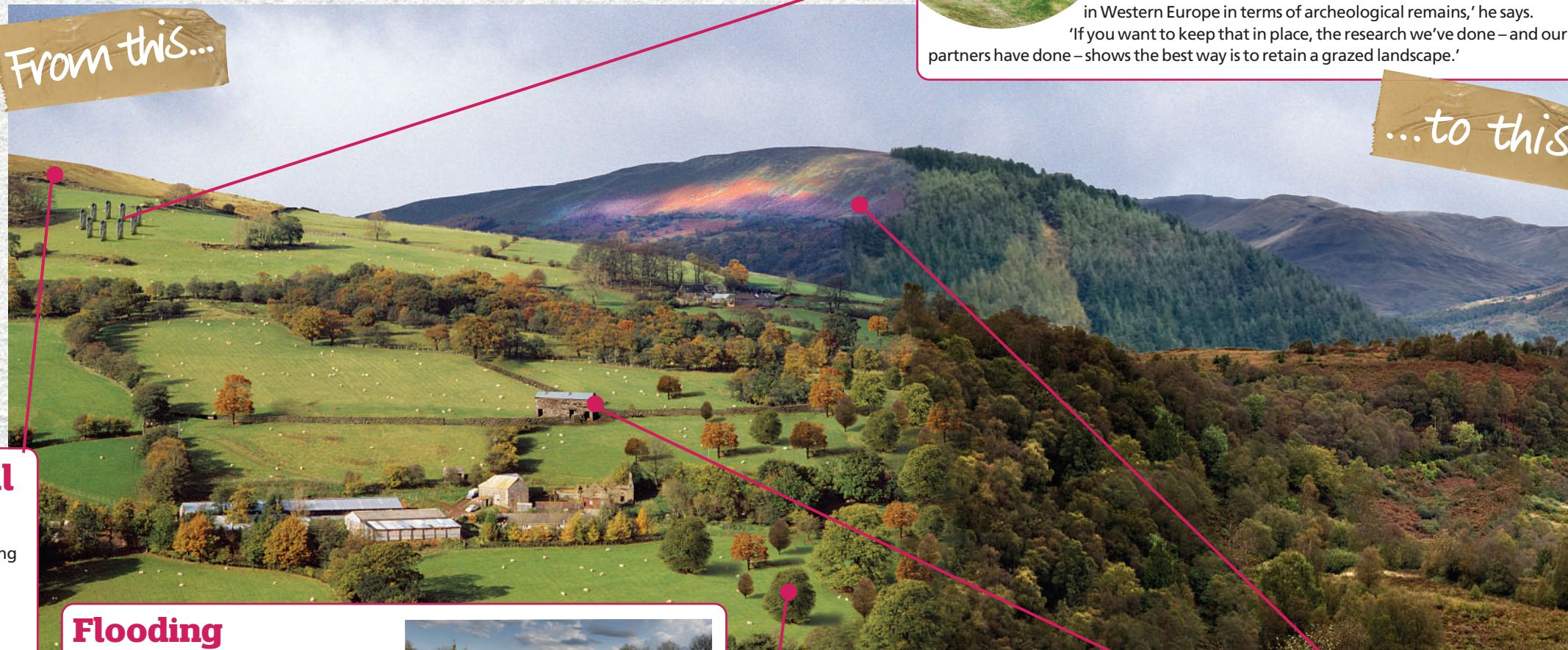


What future for our uplands?

Picture Britain's uplands. Not as they are today, but vast vistas of forest and dense foliage. Gone are the farmers, gone too are the sheep and livestock that graze on the uplands – some of Britain's 'wildest' locations. For some, this 're-wilding' of our uplands would be a panacea. But what are the real implications of allowing the nation's uplands to return to their feral roots?

Guy Whitmore looks at a Britain without farmed uplands and asks if this is a realistic option, or a step too far?

From this...



...to this?

The agricultural industry

What are the implications of re-wilding for upland farmers and the rural communities that depend on them?

Will Cockbain explains that as farmers often have the right to graze livestock on the uplands, re-wilding the uplands would spell disaster.

'Commoners do not own anything that grows on the land, and don't have any claim to what's underneath it,' he says. 'If you re-wild the uplands, farmers would then not be able to use the land for grazing, so these rural businesses would disappear.'

But the implications of this would be nationwide, he adds, as it would remove the core of the beef and sheep industry.

'Livestock on the uplands is key to producing livestock for the rest of the UK, and uses a system that has been successful for hundreds of years,' continues Will, who is chair of the Cumbria and North Lancashire Rural and Farming Network.

'All that breeding experience, that the UK's livestock industry relies on, would be wasted.'

Flooding

Would turning the uplands into huge forests really help tackle a major problem that Britain is likely to see more of in the future: severe flooding?

The theory goes that by planting mile after mile of trees, the uplands would become a 'natural sink' for rainfall, as roots from the trees absorb excessive water. This stops it running off to lowland areas, and therefore eases the risk of flooding.

But Robert Helliwell, of the Peak District National Park Authority, is unequivocal. For him, it takes the eye away from the real issue.

'We have a growing population that needs to be housed, so there is more building on flood plains as they're flat, and more tarmac and hard surfaces are being laid,' he explains.

'Then people tarmac their drives and forecourts, which stops water being absorbed in the same way it used to be. To say more trees need to be planted in the uplands is to completely miss the point.'

While he points out that scientific



evidence shows planting trees can reduce the water table, and therefore could help to some degree, he stresses trees do not provide a 'silver bullet' for flooding.

'Trees would only be able to absorb so much before they too become saturated and stop taking water in,' Robert continues.

Ian Moodie, flood management and access adviser from the NFU, stressed that upland farmers were happy to do their bit to stop flooding using initiatives such as water catchment schemes. But he warned the schemes would need to be a part of other wider initiatives, such as improved river maintenance.

'They should not be expected to significantly reduce flooding in extensive lowland areas, such as the Somerset Levels, on their own,' he continued.

Archaeological sites



Perhaps surprisingly, a major problem on some parts of the uplands is under-grazing. As livestock levels have dropped in the past 50 years, so areas such as Dartmoor and Exmoor have suffered from not being grazed enough.

According to Defra, between 1996 and last year sheep flocks in the UK reduced by a quarter, and cattle herds reduced by 22 per cent.

Kevin Bishop, chief executive of Dartmoor national park, explains that under-grazing has implications for some much-loved uplands monuments.

'Dartmoor's probably the premiere archeological landscape in Western Europe in terms of archeological remains,' he says.

'If you want to keep that in place, the research we've done – and our partners have done – shows the best way is to retain a grazed landscape.'

Tourism

If the uplands were returned to the wilderness, what would happen to much-loved locations such as the Lake District and Exmoor?

Will Cockbain explains that the uplands have provided many of the much-loved landscapes that are visited by millions, helping to support the multi-billion pound tourism industry.

He points to the Lake District, which has more than 15 million visitors every year, all wanting to see the landscape that inspired poets. It is also a candidate for a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

'That was a farmed environment, like the one that still exists today and still attracts millions of visitors every year, not a forest like we had thousands of years ago,' he says. 'If you have endless forests all you are going to see is trees. People want to see the great expanses and openness provided by the uplands and enjoy the feeling of space that the landscape provides.'



So, do farmers help the uplands?

Most farmers living and working in the uplands are involved in environmental protection schemes. Robin Milton, of the Devon local nature partnership, explains that farmers put a lot of effort into preserving natural habitats through agri-environment schemes.

'Farmers care about wildlife and their surroundings, it's their home and their work place,' he says.

'When farmers like me are mowing, for example, we will leave areas that we know have wildlife in them, or leave part of a hedge that has a new nest of birds in it.'

'Farmers also re-build stone walls when fences would suffice and would be a lot cheaper, because they care about the way the the uplands look.'

According to Natural England, more than a third – 37 per cent – of Sites of Specific Scientific Interest, which include uplands, have the highest standards possible for levels of wildlife and nature. Less than four per cent were classed as remaining static or declining.

This, says Tom Fullick, livestock adviser at the NFU, demonstrates the positive impact agriculture has on the uplands.

'Farmers provide food with ever-increasing demands being put on them, but they work hard to ensure that whatever they do, it helps not hinders the natural environment,' he says.

The Single Payment Scheme

Has the Single Payment Scheme encouraged farmers to clear trees, hedgerows and scrubland from upland areas, which in turn increased water run-off from the hills and damaged wildlife?

Ian Moodie of the NFU explains that deforestation of the uplands commenced long before the Single Payment Scheme, introduced in 1993.

'This is not a new landscape,' he says. 'The husbandry of grazing livestock has been an integral part of English upland agriculture for hundreds of years. Animals, plant species, landscapes and husbandry systems have adapted, or have been adapted, over generations.'

However, he adds today's farmers and policymakers aim to work much more closely with nature, treading the fine line between maintaining a centuries-old landscape, producing food and protecting wildlife through agri-environment schemes.

Heather moors

One environment that would be hit by re-wilding is heather moorland, a rare resource, of which 75 per cent of the world's total is in Britain.

Farmer Will Cockbain explains that many environmentalists and government bodies feel these moorlands need to be preserved. He adds that farmers and organisations, such as Natural England, have used schemes such as planting of trees in appropriate places to help secure the future of these moorlands.

'But re-wilding the uplands would destroy these heather moorlands,' Will continues.



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