

SPORTING ESTATES AND THE RECREATIONAL ECONOMY IN THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS OF SCOTLAND

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There are around 340 sporting estates in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland covering 5.2 million acres of land (for a definition of a sporting estate, see Wightman et al, submitted). They represent over 30% of the total privately-owned land in Scotland and over 50% of privately-owned land in the Highlands and Islands. They thus represent a significant influence in how land is used in the region.

Despite the contested nature of their existence (e.g. MacDiarmid 1926; Hunter 1998; Jarvie et al 1997; Wigan 1991; Wightman 1996), sporting estates have managed to survive and indeed thrive for over 100 years, bolstered by the power and influence of monied classes and political patronage. No serious or sustained challenge to their dominance has emerged this century and public policy towards them has been notable by its ambivalence and, in many respects, complete absence.

In a changing political climate made all the more volatile by the re-establishment of a Scottish Parliament in 1999 and the emergence of new public policy agendas on rural development and land reform (Scottish Office

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1998 and 1999), the owners of such holdings are increasingly finding themselves drawn into a debate about the legitimacy and validity of the sporting estate. But any such inquiry that the Scottish Parliament might care to make will require good quality information and analysis. This is still lacking and debates on land reform remain hampered by poor data on the pattern, nature and character of landownership and land use in Scotland. The Government, for example, collects no information about the nature or character of sporting estates and the political sensitivity surrounding landownership and hunting has led to only a limited amount of academic research being conducted (Armstrong and Mather 1983; MacGregor 1988; MacGregor and Stockdale 1994).

In spite of such a paucity of hard information, debates about the legitimacy of sporting estates have yielded a number of perspectives which have formed the platform for protagonists and antagonists to construct the case for and against the sporting estate regime. One of the most vital of these surrounds the economics of both hunting and sporting estates, and the contribution they make to the rural economy. (Hunting, it should be stressed, is used in this paper in its accepted international sense to refer to all forms of sport which involve the pursuit and killing of wild animals including deer, wild birds and fish. It is not to be confused with the term as used locally in parts of the UK to refer to fox-hunting on horseback with hounds).

Protagonists of the sporting estate regime argue that sporting estates, despite making substantial revenue losses, make a positive contribution to Highland Scotland by providing employment and investment. Critics argue that such employment is low paid and encourages a servile mentality whilst the supposed virtue of capital inflows only serves to sustain an outdated and inappropriate form of land use whilst incurring opportunity costs in doing so.

Sporting estates, it should be pointed out, have never been rational economic holdings in the sense that owners either expect or derive a revenue surplus from them. They have always been, by contrast, a form of conspicuous consumption which, together with retainers (ghillies), uniforms (tweeds) and large country houses (hunting lodges), provided a forceful statement of social and financial standing within the leisure classes (Veblen 1994 [1899]). Today they continue to represent a complex social phenomenon attracting owners for whom sport is but one of a range of motivations including political stability, investment, status, seclusion and freedom from restrictions (Rettie 1998).

Such complexities have led policy makers to avoid any meaningful analysis of, or perspective, on the role of sporting estates in the rural economy even

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though such analysis is becoming more vital as the land reform debate matures. It is also vital given the increased economic significance of outdoor recreation (Highlands and Islands Enterprise 1996) and the fact that, although hunting is a form of recreation, this has yet to be recognised either officially by Sport Scotland or unofficially by other public agencies. As a consequence the public policy discourse has been confused and frustrated by the lack of a coherent analytical framework (Wightman et al, submitted).

In particular there remains confusion between sporting estates (the landholding framework) and hunting (the activity). This is particularly the case when discussing the economics of sporting estates. Figures relating to the economic impact of hunting are frequently used in defence of the sporting estate regime when in fact the relationship between the sporting estate and the rational exploitation of the hunting economy is far from direct or valid (Wightman et al, submitted).

This paper explores what is known about the economics of hunting and of sporting estates and how this has been incorporated into arguments presented in defence of the sporting estate regime. It aims to provide some analytical clarity to arguments which are often presented as part of a polemical or politicised discourse. It attempts to place the economics of hunting and of sporting estates into the wider context of the outdoor recreational economy whilst recognising that there are other dimensions to the subject. Hunting is, for example, an activity which is concerned also with land management, most obviously with controlling the population of red deer. The paper concludes by exploring alternatives to the current regime which, in line with developing thinking on land reform and rural development, might be more suited to the social and economic needs of the 21st century.

HUNTING AND THE OUTDOOR RECREATIONAL ECONOMY

In reviewing the hunting economy in relationship to sporting estates, the following analysis is limited to those activities most closely associated with the sporting estate regime and which take place in upland environments - namely sporting shooting (stalking, rough shooting and grouse shooting). It excludes fishing, as much of this takes place at lower elevations, on land owned and managed on a separate basis, and does not by and large conflict with other recreational activities in the uplands.

There have been a number of macro-economic studies of the hunting economy (eg Cobham Resource Consultants 1982; McGilvray et al 1990). Whilst there have been recent reviews of the contribution of outdoor

recreation to the Scottish economy (eg Scottish Natural Heritage 1998; Higgins 2000), there have been few detailed studies, and only one which analyses that other key form of upland outdoor recreation, hillwalking. That study was commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise and looked at the economics of hillwalking and mountaineering (Highlands and Islands Enterprise 1996). Table 1 summarises the key economic statistics from these studies.

Table 1
Economic impact of hunting (sporting shooting) and mountaineering

	Hunting (Scotland)	Mountaineering (Highlands and Islands)
Participant expenditure	£29.6m	£158.0m
Direct expenditure	£72.3m	£163.7m
Employment (FTE)	7200	6100
Income generation	£53.0m	£53.0m

source: from McGilvray et al 1990 and HIE 1996.

It should be noted that hunting data includes overseas participants and lowland shooting activities and applies to the whole of Scotland. In contrast, mountaineering data is restricted to the Highlands and Islands and to hillwalking above 2500 ft, technical climbing, ski-mountaineering and high level ski touring. It also excludes overseas participants.

Mountaineering is quite clearly therefore the more valuable recreational land use in the uplands of the Highlands and Islands given that only a proportion of the £72.3 million spend and £53 million income from sporting shooting may be attributed to either the uplands or to the Highland and Islands. The proportion associated with the Highlands and Islands could be less than 50% given that the area in question comprises around 50% of the land area of Scotland and on the assumption that the economic contribution from shooting is equally split between the Highlands and the Lowlands.

Furthermore, on the assumption that 50% of the hunting economy is attributable to the Highlands and Islands and that, of that, 50% is attributed to upland sporting estates (the remainder being low ground shooting in the region), mountaineering alone in the Highlands and Islands may contribute as much as four times more than sporting shooting in income terms (£53m for mountaineering as compared to one quarter of £53m for hunting) and eight

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times more so in terms of direct expenditure (£163.7m for mountaineering as compared to one quarter of £72.3m for hunting).

Such a contrast raises questions about priorities, strategies and structures within which to develop the respective forms of recreation so as to optimise the gains to be had. What is the role of the sporting estate as the dominant framework within which to manage such co-existence and to promote and develop the recreational economy? Part of the problem in addressing such a question is the dearth of information on, and analysis of, the structure, ownership (and motives behind ownership), financial performance and management of sporting estates.

In particular, a barrier to more rational discussion of the place of sporting estates in the recreational economy is the lack of empirical data on their economic performance. This contrasts with the plethora of assertions that are made about the subject for political purposes. Before exploring that issue it is worth assessing just what is known about the economics of sporting estates.

THE SPORTING ESTATE ECONOMY

Despite the range of economic analyses focussing on the macroeconomic impact of hunting in Scotland, there remains virtually no reliable data on the economic performance of sporting estates. Such estates provide an important venue for hunting in the Highlands and Islands, but it is unclear exactly how their structure, administration, financing and management relate to the wider hunting economy.

A prevalent observation made by estate owners and hunting interests is that sporting estates cost more to run than they generate in income (Cadogan 1998; Wigan 1991, p.141; Wigan 1996, p.60; van Vlissingen 1996). For example:

Once you go north-west of Inverness, every estate costs money. You might break even south-east of Inverness if you have grouse and sheep subsidies and timber and fishing from the Spey or the Tweed. I would be very surprised if, north-west of Loch Ness, there was a single estate that makes a profit.
(van Vlissingen 1996).

What evidence is there for this, and if losses are indeed the norm, why is this? A survey by McGilvray et al (1990) of estates across Scotland estimated that total revenue from sporting shooting was £28.6 million with an expenditure of £32.7m. This represents a deficit of 14% of turnover and suggests that estates

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offering shooting do so at a loss, although it does not imply that the estates as a whole are unprofitable. The data is for all estates providing shooting and not simply sporting estates in the Highlands and Islands.

A survey of 101 members of the Association of Deer Management Groups concluded that, 'on average, estates with a deer management enterprise suffer an annual deficit equivalent to 15.5% of gross turnover. Such operating deficits are funded by estate owners from external sources' (Association of Deer Management Groups 1998). The survey was not statistically robust, but, interestingly, provides an order of magnitude deficit for estates similar to that found by McGilvray et al (1990) for sporting shooting enterprises.

In order to understand the significance of these figures it is necessary to analyse both the revenue and the expenditure sides of estate economics. In any analysis of estate finances the cost centres are relatively consistent (lodge maintenance, vehicles, gamekeepers etc). Revenue sources, however, are much more variable depending on the degree to which an owner is willing or able to attract income.

Costs are incurred on more than simply those elements directly associated with sustaining a hunting operation and extend to the costs of lodges, full-time employees and other facilities which are not exclusively or wholly attributable to the costs of running a hunting enterprise. One study by MacGregor and Stockdale (1994) showed that nearly two thirds of investment on sporting estates was linked to maintenance of the lodge or estate cottages. If this is representative of sporting estates as a whole it is difficult to escape the conclusion that much of the investment is for private comfort rather than revenue generation. What limited data exists, therefore, suggests that the direct costs of providing the services required for non-owner hunters may be substantially less than the actual costs incurred in running sporting estates.

The other aspect of the deficit is revenue generation. Historically, sporting estates developed on the basis of long sporting leases to wealthy tenants. They subsequently acquired the estate either through purchase or because the owner was unable to compensate for improvements on an improving lease. Such people were conspicuous consumers and willing to bear the costs of running a sporting estate to enjoy a level of social prestige and hunting opportunities.

Today the owners of sporting estates are more likely to mix private enjoyment with varying degrees of commercial letting of days or weeks hunting. There is little evidence to suggest that any owners are running their estates purely as a hunting business. More often it would appear that a certain amount of sport is let usually via an agent (either the managing agent for the

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estate or a specialist hunting agency) to generate revenue in order to reduce operating deficits.

The extent of commercial letting is uncertain but the only detailed study of red deer management on estates suggests that it is lower than it could be. Jarvie (1980), in a survey conducted for the Scottish Landowners' Federation in 1978/79, found that around 30% of all red deer culled annually were shot for sport (for stags alone the figure is just less than 60%). The remainder were shot as part of control measures (damage to agriculture and forestry) or culling and management of deer (much of the hind cull). Of the red deer shot for sport around half were shot on a commercial basis and half shot by estate owners and their guests. Thus only around 16% of the total cull and 31% of stags culled are shot on a commercial sporting basis with the rest shot by owners, estate staff, and non-paying guests (Jarvie 1980). As Callander and MacKenzie (1991, p.22) concluded, this study demonstrated clearly that income to estates from stalking lets and associated accommodation could be substantially higher if more were let on a commercial basis.

Since these figures were published the extent of commercial letting has probably increased. MacGregor and Stockdale (1994), in a study of land use change on estates in North West Sutherland, found that, during the 1980s, seven out of nineteen sporting estates let deer-stalking for the first time. Brochures produced by sporting agents also suggest that more sport is being made available on a commercial basis. Finlayson Hughes, a leading sporting agent, recently publicised hunting on one of Scotland's oldest and most famous deer forests, claiming that 'the stalking at Ardverikie has been almost exclusively retained by the family in the past and we are delighted to be able to offer an unrivalled opportunity to secure a stalking tenancy here' (Finlayson Hughes 1997).

Thus there arises the opportunity costs of private enjoyment of hunting. The present authors understand from sources within the sporting estate establishment that private consumption is accounted for in management accounts but the extent to which this is responsible for reported revenue deficits is unknown.

On the basis of a 15% deficit on estate turnover (Association of Deer Management Groups 1998), it is not unreasonable to postulate that hunting on sporting estates could be run at a profit if desired, given that a significant element in the costs of running an estate would appear to be associated with, for example, lodge maintenance which is not wholly or even partly necessary to sustain a hunting economy (hunters can and do stay in a range of perfectly adequate hotels).

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Overall, the evidence suggests that sporting estate owners, whilst they may be cost-minimisers, are certainly not profit-maximisers. This is consistent with the status of sporting estates as a complex social phenomenon in which for example private enjoyment and capital appreciation have been shown to be more important than even hunting (Wightman et al, submitted). In other words owning a sporting estate is on a par with the conspicuous consumption of, for example, a yacht or classic car. Some revenue can be generated from chartering and letting if desired but this is to reduce the running costs rather than as the principal use of a commercial business asset. It is the difference between, on the one hand, owning a yacht and chartering it occasionally and, on the other hand, running a yacht-chartering business.

In such circumstances it is difficult to ascertain the true nature and performance of sporting estate operations. But this has not prevented the economic discourse becoming prominent in debates surrounding their legitimacy and role in the rural economy. This discourse is substantially political in tone and is worth exploring in some detail.

SPORTING ESTATES AS BENEVOLENT RURAL INSTITUTIONS

Assertions relating to the economics of hunting and sporting estates form a central part of the argument advanced by landed interests in defence of the sporting estate and in opposition to broadly articulated arguments for land reform which may have an impact on sporting estates. Understanding the relevance of this discourse is an essential part of analysing the role of the sporting estate, the meaning of some of the land reform debate, and the implications for the recreational land use economy.

Put briefly, the argument in defence of the existing division and use of land runs as follows:-

- hunting is a valuable component of the rural economy;
- sporting estates lose money and the rural economy is supported by the inflow of capital and revenue which, were it not forthcoming, would lead to the economic collapse of many remote rural areas.

So, for example,

Sporting interests are the biggest revenue earner for much of Scotland north of Perth. Indeed in the west of Scotland there is little other source of income.

(**Shooting Gazette** 1998, p.46)

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and

Without shooting, stalking and fishing there is no question that villages would be threatened and schools closed. For six months of the year many, many hotels are largely dependent on sportsmen for business. They could not exist without them.

(Dingwall-Fordyce 1998)

or, as the former editor of the **Daily Telegraph** rather more provocatively put it,

The delusion is widely held in Scotland ... that the Highlands are a paradise in a state of natural grace, which might more properly be held in public ownership. The Scots must be told again and again until they start to believe it, that their hills are in reality intensively and expensively managed by private landowners, almost all of whom incur huge financial cost in doing so, which would have to be made good from the public purse if they were not there.

(Hastings 1995)

But the idea, for example, that sporting estates are in any sense normal business enterprises has been challenged by no less an authority than the independent Chair of Scotland's Rating Valuation Tribunals who, in a report to the Scottish Office which was leaked to the press observed,

Sporting estates like to describe themselves, when it suits them, as being part of a sporting industry. In fact they are part of an inefficient trade which pays inadequate attention to marketing their product, largely because profit is not the prime objective.

It continued,

These sporting estates change hands for capital sums which far exceed their letting value and which are of no benefit to the area, and are often bought because there are tax advantages to the purchaser, not necessarily in the UK.

Dismissing the argument that sporting estates provide employment and should therefore be freed of the burden of sporting rates, the Chairman's report points out that,

The local staff are poorly paid, their wages bearing no relation to the capital invested in the purchase price, and it is not unusual to find a man

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responsible for an investment in millions being paid a basic agricultural wage. Many of the estates use short-term labour during the sporting season, leaving the taxpayer to pay their staff from the dole for the rest of the year. Estates can in many cases be deliberately run at a loss, thereby reducing their owner's tax liability to central funds elsewhere in the UK. (Dewing 1994)

It is difficult, however, to obtain any data to verify such assertions since sporting estates make no official economic returns of any kind and are notoriously wary of divulging any information on their activities or economic performance. However, one estate was recently forthcoming in its plans for the future. Letterewe Estate in Wester Ross published a 10-year Management Plan in September 1998 (Letterewe Estate 1998).

The Plan outlines the management objectives ('the natural development of wild land, its flora and fauna in all its interrelationships') and argues that the owners see the estate as a 'valuable wild land asset to be loved', rather than as 'a producer of income'. The plan was launched at a press conference in September 1998 against the backdrop of the political debate on land reform in Scotland. The owner, Paul van Vlissingen, a Dutch businessman, made a number of comments on the prospects of land reform (van Vlissingen 1998).

What makes the Plan interesting is its presentation of the estate as a benevolent institution which makes heavy operating deficits and which finances scientific research and provides other 'local support'. To reinforce this message, the Plan includes a summary of the estate's finances as follows (excluding scientific research and 'other local support'):

Present estimated market value	£8 000 000
Average Annual Income	£130 000
Average Annual Costs	£250 000
Yearly out-of-pocket loss	£120 000
Loss of income on Asset value at 7%	£560 000
Total loss of income to owners per annum	£680 000

Such a financial presentation reinforces the view of sporting estates as benevolent institutions in which losses are inevitable and which make significant financial inputs to the local economy. But interestingly the figures imply more than the usual simple annual revenue losses and suggest that investment income foregone on the asset value (i.e. the income the owner would have received if it were invested elsewhere) represents a further

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benevolent contribution to the local economy. On this basis the total 'loss of income' to the owners is a breathtaking £680 000 per annum.

However, not only is the revenue loss impossible to analyse any further (e.g. is the private consumption of the estate for holidays and hunting paid for in these accounts?), but the figures do not reveal that the underlying asset (the land) has undergone significant capital appreciation. On the basis of the purchase price of the estate (which was bought in different parcels since 1978 for a total of £3 405 000) and a current value of £8 000 000, the property has grown in value by 7.8% per annum. In 1999 alone such growth will yield a capital appreciation of £624 000, a figure which outperforms the opportunity cost of investment elsewhere and which is more than sufficient to finance ongoing annual operating deficits.

Letterewe, far from being a loss-making concern, has actually performed handsomely and annual losses are not inevitable trading losses but the price paid for the consumption of non-market benefits. The fact that the land asset has appreciated so markedly is evidence of substantial net benefits being derived from the asset. Further complications in interpreting the nature and scale of the financial performance are introduced if one attempts to include potential tax liability since the core part of the estate is owned by Clyde properties NV, a company registered in Curaçao, a tax haven in the Dutch Antilles.

This particular case supports the analysis that the deficits incurred by sporting estates, which are frequently portrayed as either inevitable (sporting estates lose money) or benevolent (sporting estates support the local economy), may have as much to do with external off-estate factors as internal estate ones. One of these is capital appreciation, an important motivation in landowning (Armstrong and Mather 1983; MacGregor and Stockdale 1994, Rettie 1998). Analysis by Strutt and Parker, the estate agents, for example, shows that sporting estates have appreciated in value between 1980 and 1997 by 8% per annum (Rettie 1998), a figure which correlates closely with the capital appreciation of Letterewe over a similar period.

As MacGregor and Stockdale (1994) argue, management objectives and land use decisions on Highland estates are more influenced by the motivations of the owner than by trends in public policy. Possibly to conceal this fact, hunting estate owners have promoted a discourse which emphasises both the inevitability of loss-making and the economic benefits to rural economies from the external subventions made by proprietors. Such claims, whilst difficult to verify, have nevertheless taken a firm hold and succeeded in creating a climate of resigned acceptance by public policy makers. A myth

has been promoted that there is therefore no alternative to the sporting estate regime.

TOWARDS INTEGRATED OUTDOOR RECREATIONAL LAND USE

Sir Frank Fraser Darling asserted in 1972 that outdoor recreation was the primary land use in much of the Highlands and Islands (Fraser Darling 1972). Recent evidence confirms his view (HIE 1996; Wightman et. al., submitted). It is legitimate to question therefore whether the Highland sporting estate is the most useful and efficient vehicle for the kind of investment in, and management of, the land resource base upon which outdoor recreation (including hunting) depends. Such a concern goes beyond mere academic curiosity and arises from the seeming disparity between, on the one hand, the necessity to manage outdoor recreation, and on the other hand the peculiar and concentrated pattern of ownership of sporting estates, the high capital values associated with them, and the particular motives of their owners.

It is also stimulated by the thought that the mountain areas of the Highlands and Islands could, like the mountain areas of Scandinavia and much of Europe, be more intensively managed to promote and develop all forms of outdoor recreation. Currently much of the footpath infrastructure and accommodation in mountain areas is far inferior in its extent, range, quality and management to almost everything that other countries in Europe have to offer. Mountain accommodation in particular is struggling to cope with the demands being placed upon it (Crowe and Reid 1998).

To some people, such a view might appear heretical given the rugged and wild landscapes of the Highlands which provide such a particular and unique experience often characterised by solitude and austerity. But whatever view one takes of how the resource should be managed there is little doubt that in order to sustain and develop the outdoor recreational economy, a strategic approach is long overdue. Such an approach should also incorporate hunting within the wider range of outdoor recreational pursuits since as a sport it takes place primarily in the same space as, and shares many of the same values of, the outdoor experience (wild nature, physical endeavour and skills) that are central to mountaineering and walking.

To develop such a strategic approach it will be necessary to challenge the hegemony of the sporting estate and to conduct a more informed and critical appraisal of its role in the outdoor recreational economy. This is not necessarily to suggest that it has no role but it is evident that the personal

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attitudes and motivations of the 340 or so sporting estate owners have been and continue to be somewhat different from those who see an alternative future for the 5.2 million acres of land in question.

Visions of an alternative future can be generated which may involve a radically different division of land and organisation of land use. The purpose of doing so is primarily to make the point that such alternatives do indeed exist and that they might prove more appropriate to the social, economic and environmental challenges of the 21st century than the social and economic assumptions and structures which persist today as the legacy of the Victorian and Edwardian sporting estate. Furthermore, public policy on such matters has been dogged by normative and reductionist thinking and has suffered from a lack of visionary strategic thinking. Sporting estates, hunting, and the wider outdoor recreational economy have been sorely neglected whilst other key land uses such as agriculture and forestry have at least enjoyed some, albeit limited, visionary thinking.

A strategic view of the future needs to acknowledge that hunting and other forms of outdoor recreation are desirable and legitimate forms of land use which should be developed within a new framework which seeks to optimise land use, increase investment, and broaden the base of decision making and accountability over land use in the Highlands. Arguably, the current sporting estate regime does not do this for a range of economic, social and environmental reasons:

- It is not driven by rational economic criteria in its management and does not even maximise the potential income from hunting.
- It has fostered an elitist social formation which has contributed to the dislocation of local communities and culture.
- It has been responsible for restrictions on access and environmental degradation.
- At best it tolerates other recreational activities rather than embracing and developing them, and represents an opportunity cost in terms of the full exploitation of alternative recreational activities.
- High capital values associated with the consumption of status and leisure have precluded alternative approaches to the management of the Highland hills.

The purpose of any alternative approach would be to achieve optimum recreational land use from Highland hills by putting in place a framework of ownership and control within which all forms of recreational land use were

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developed and promoted. This would involve looking at each activity and seeking to develop its strengths, manage its impacts and meet its needs for the future.

Such an approach would aim to achieve the following specific objectives:-

- Ecological restoration and management of the wild nature experience for hillwalkers and hunters (wildness is traditionally part of the experience but has been eroded for hunters and to some extent for hillwalkers by bulldozed tracks and the use of mechanised vehicles).
- Pro-active management of hillwalking economy in terms of huts, lodges and trails (along the lines of countries like Norway) designed to attract more participants and achieve dispersal of impacts throughout the Highlands and Islands.
- Retention of wealthy hunters who can own lodges and lease hunting as part of the wider distribution of hunting opportunities.
- Self-employment of gamekeepers who also act as guides and nature wardens.
- Improved game management, particularly of red deer through licensing schemes.

This envisages a future for the region which places recreational land use at the heart of economic development and environmental enhancement. Central to such a future is that areas such as the Mamores and the Cairngorms would be vested in community land trusts where ownership of the land would be made inalienable and recreational development would be overseen by the community but implemented by private enterprise.

This would involve alienating land for fixed developments, in particular hunting lodges and other forms of accommodation. The kind of substantial wealth possessed by many prospective sporting estate owners could be captured by offering them not a sporting estate en bloc but the opportunity to buy the lodges (where much of the money is spent) and by selling them long leases (5-10 years) of the hunting rights (which would be vested in the local community). Meanwhile not-for-profit organisations could be franchised to develop and promote trails, guidance and information.

There would be substantial reforestation to improve the environment and to diversify the recreational experience for both hunters and other users.

Gamekeepers could become self-employed or employees of private hunting businesses which purchase or lease licences from the community. They could

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become more multi-skilled in other forms of recreation and in environmental management thus developing a highly skilled and trained hunter/mountain guide/naturalist capable of integrating a range of disciplines which are currently sectoral. This would also extend the work season for individuals.

Such an alternative vision for the future does of course raise questions about the mechanics of achieving it. This is a vexed question although it is interesting to note that elements of an alternative way forward have already been proposed by Callander and MacKenzie (1991), MacMillan (1999), and Lister-Kaye (1994). In addition, Assynt Crofters Ltd. are developing something along these lines on the North Assynt Estate in Sutherland (MacKenzie 1999).

The current climate for land reform suggests that it might become easier in future to challenge some of the shibboleths which have been erected both by protagonists and antagonists of the sporting estate regime. So far, however, only a relatively limited set of land reform measures has been put forward which tend to deal with the more acute symptoms of the current system and division of land (Scottish Office 1999; Scottish National Party 1999). A more radical approach, however, would be required to achieve even a modest change in the pattern and character of Highland sporting estates.

It is abundantly clear, for example, that the current unregulated market in sporting estate is one important reason for the inflated values of such holdings. Wealthy interests from around the world are bidding against each other and forcing up prices. A reduction in value of estates consequent on more regulation would be a good thing if, for example, capital previously committed to purchase no longer simply transferred to the previous owner but was released for investment in infrastructure and a hunting licence from the local community. Greater economic leverage would thus be obtained from the sums of money currently paid for sporting estates.

Even if radical changes are not possible there is a range of options available to policy makers which could improve the social, economic and environmental benefits flowing from the existing sporting estate regime. These include a more accountable framework of public regulation through companies law as argued by Boyd (1999), and the adoption of whole estate management planning and environmental and social auditing.

All this of course raises many questions which require further exploration. Crucially, however, the sporting regime is not an inevitable fixture in the Highland landscape and could very well be a transient phenomenon. Whether it should be or will be will depend on the extent to which public policy-

makers are willing to engage in rather more serious study and enquiry than has been evident in the past.

CONCLUSIONS

The way in which economic data has been generated and deployed continues to confuse and frustrate meaningful debate about land use, outdoor recreation and sporting estates. Sporting estates make an operating loss because their owners are content to do so, whilst at the same time deriving benefits from the consumption of non-material benefits such as status and private enjoyment. Assertions of benevolent contributions to the local economy and loss making enterprises have to be measured against such benefits and against the strong capital appreciation enjoyed by sporting estate assets.

The confused and poorly informed debate concerning the economic contribution of sporting estates suggests that the time has come to subject the sporting estate regime to a more rigorous and analytical examination than has hitherto been the case.

Existing interests in the status quo have the capacity to participate in such an exercise as there should be scope to continue to provide access to high value hunting. But a more progressive and pluralistic approach to outdoor recreation and upland land management may demand as dramatic reform as occurred in the last great wave of recreational capitalism - that of the genesis of the sporting estate in the 19th century.

Whatever transpires over the coming years it is hard to see how public policy can remain uninterested in a phenomenon which has had such a profound impact on the division and use of land in the Highlands and Islands. There is a pressing need for a more pro-active and reform-oriented examination of how to develop and promote hunting and the wider outdoor recreational economy. At the very least there should be better data and analysis available to assess the real contribution that sporting estates make to both the recreational economy and the wider rural economy. Without this, the debate will remain dominated by propaganda based on the selective and partial use of economic data by existing interests which is impossible to corroborate in most cases.

For over a century the sporting estate has dominated the division and use of land in the Highlands and Islands and has in the process generated a good deal of debate. Now is the time to begin to better inform such debates and to question the idea that such a situation is either inevitable or incapable of being reformed.

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