

Just Transition and Wild Places

Executive summary

How people and wild places can help achieve net zero in Scotland

The idea of a just transition to net zero began with a recognition that decarbonisation of energy should be managed in a way that protects workers and communities dependent on the fossil fuels industry. It has since evolved into a broader ambition to ensure that the gains and losses of the transition to net zero should be spread widely and fairly.

As a community focused conservation charity dedicated to the experience, protection and repair of wild places across the UK, the John Muir Trust wholeheartedly supports the principle of a just transition that combines environmental and social justice. In this summary, we focus specifically on Scotland's wild places and set out some ideas to show how these can contribute to a just transition.

We recognise that not everyone is familiar or comfortable with the term 'wild places.' In recent years, it has become a popular term among the general public to describe areas that, at least on the surface, appear to be natural. Yet for many who live in and around these areas, the description can feel like it ignores their presence or could be a barrier to economic and social progress.

The John Muir Trust believes that transforming land use for the benefit of climate and biodiversity should be done in a way that helps diversify our land ownership and management; that

revives our most sparsely populated areas socially, economically and culturally; and that ensures local communities reap a fair proportion of the financial benefits from any economic activities.

The ideas set out in this summary are not tablets of stone, but, we hope, the opening of a dialogue with all those who have an interest in transforming the way Scotland's land and wild places are used, owned and managed.

Read the full Just Transition and Wild Places publication and find out more at johnmuirtrust.org/justtransition



Carbon and a just transition



Our wild places have the capacity to remove and store carbon on an immense scale.

Large-scale public, private and third sector investment into nature-based climate projects could kick-start an economic renaissance across many of our most sparsely populated areas.

Carbon funding needs to be done properly, however, to instil public and community confidence. By putting in place a robust framework, the Scottish Government could help steer rural Scotland into a transformational new era.

We would urge the Scottish Government to develop a robust framework for carbon offsetting backed by an accreditation scheme for landowners – public, private, community and third sector – which would be both a seal of governmental approval and a precondition for public funding.

In addition, we believe there is a case for a well-designed Carbon Emissions Land Tax, collected and distributed by local authorities to ensure compliance with devolved powers.

This would target large landowners – over 1000 ha – who insist on running their estates without considering the urgent public objectives of mitigating climate change and restoring biodiversity. And it could assist communities, crofters and other smaller landholders make the transition to carbon negative.

To maximise natural carbon storage in a way that is socially just and environmentally robust, the John Muir Trust would like to see:

- A Scottish Government 'gold standard' accreditation scheme for carbon offsetting.
- The scheme to insist on fully audited, real net emissions, and biodiversity improvements.
- The scheme to insist on a community share allocation, and community participation in management of projects.
- The scheme to prioritise local jobs and training for young people.
- A local authority led Carbon Emissions Land Tax (CELT) on all landholdings over 1000 ha based on a banding system.
- Devolved powers permitting, at least a portion of Carbon Emissions Land Tax revenues ring-fenced to support communities, crofters and small landholders make a green transition.

Biodiversity and a just transition



Scotland, like the rest of the UK and the wider world, is staring at a biodiversity crisis without parallel in human history. According to the United Nations, around one million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction, many within decades.

In the Biodiversity Intactness Index measuring wildlife and wild places lost due to human activity in 240 countries and territories, the nations of the UK are among the worst in the world: England is ranked seventh from the bottom; Northern Ireland 12th; Wales 16th and Scotland 28th.

Scotland is strongly placed to become, instead, a citadel of flourishing biodiversity. Our mountains, moors and heathlands, spread across 35,000 square kilometres, have low agricultural value – but high biodiversity potential.

The key word here is 'potential.' Right now, much of that land is severely nature-depleted as result of overgrazing, burning, draining and the historic planting of dense commercial forestry plantations.

Over the last century and a half, the balance of land use across most of rural Scotland has been excessively skewed in favour of narrow private interests at a heavy cost to local communities, the natural environment and the wider national interest. We need to press the reset button.

To help achieve a greener and fairer Scotland, the John Muir Trust would like to see:

- Speedy reform of deer management and a robust licensing system of driven grouse moors.
- Financial support for crofters and small farmers to step up the shift towards nature-friendly agriculture.
- An expansion of local community woodlands, and woodland crofts.
- A target of 50 per cent native species for new woodland to provide a balance between short term jobs and long-term transformation of landscapes, ecosystems and local economies.
- A holistic strategy to maximise biodiversity recovery, including housing, infrastructure and transport that will support new nature-based jobs in sparsely populated areas.

Communities, land reform and a just transition



From an environmental perspective there is huge value in diversifying land ownership so that a larger number of people, especially those living and working locally, have a direct stake in

how the land is used.

If we want to drive ecological change on the scale needed to seriously redress centuries of destruction, we need to involve rural communities in plans and decisions. Transformation from the bottom up will always be more powerful than change imposed from the top down.

Land reform is not just about ownership. All landowners – private, public, charity, community – should be encouraged to behave as guardians and stewards of the land, with statutory obligations to the natural environment, local people and future generations.

A large part of the John Muir Trust mission is to restore, in a modern context, the lost connection between people and land. We support the work of those seeking to repeople some of our most sparsely populated areas to help strengthen the relationship between people, the natural world and traditional local culture (including the Gaelic language and regional dialects).

To help diversify land ownership and empower local communities, the John Muir Trust would like to see:

- A doubling of the Scottish Land Fund in the 2023 Scottish budget and interest-free loans for prospective community landowners.
- A fixed percentage of Crown Estate revenues to be allocated to a new Community Wealth Building Fund.
- New models for community land ownership to be explored by the Scottish Land Commission.
- A public interest test for all transfers of land over 1000 hectares based on clear environmental and social criteria.
- Revision of the planning system to give communities more say over decisions that affect the local environment.
- A detailed historic map of previously settled places to help plan for future repopulation.

Rural economy and a just transition



The tragic history of the Highlands from between mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has left a lasting legacy of depopulation and ecological impoverishment. These are two sides of

the same coin.

No-one wants to turn back the calendar to a bygone age, but we can reinvigorate the environmental, social, cultural and economic health of the Highlands and other blighted parts of remote rural Scotland. At the heart of that endeavour will be land.

Crofting and farming are deeply embedded in rural culture. Key to their future survival will be diversification, including activities connected to carbon storage and biodiversity recovery.

There are multiple competing priorities for land use: agriculture, commercial forestry, ecological restoration, renewable energy, housing, tourism and recreation. Right now, each sector strives to maximise its own prospects, leading at times to friction.

To maximise public benefit from our land we need instead an integrated approach. The John Muir Trust welcomes the Regional Land Use Partnership pilot schemes and helped establish one of these projects – North West 2045, a community-led venture, built from the bottom up rather than the top down, with a vision for the economic, social and environmental regeneration of one Scotland's most sparsely populated regions.

To help reinvigorate our most sparsely populated areas, the John Muir Trust would like to see:

- 20-minute neighbourhood social and business hubs served by affordable public transport.
- High-speed broadband in every building along with 4G or 5G connections.
- The further expansion of University of Highlands and Islands campuses to more remote rural areas with a strong focus on land-related studies and Gaelic.
- A National Land Bank to acquire land suitable for affordable and permanent residential housing.
- An alternative approach to tourism that moves beyond visual scenery and integrates landscape, culture, heritage, arts and ecology.
- Ongoing financial support for farming communities in Less Favoured Areas with a strong focus on carbon and biodiversity.

Renewable energy and a just transition



The John Muir Trust fully supports the Scottish Government's bold and ambitious climate targets. We recognise that Net Zero by 2045 will require expanding our renewables sector

alongside reducing energy use and restoring degraded peatlands and diminished native woodlands.

This presents a major challenge. How do we decarbonise energy generation while protecting our natural assets and ensuring economic benefits of renewables are spread more fairly?

The business model of the past 20 years, which involves big energy companies building large-scale development across huge areas of land, has serious downsides.

Much of that land is peatland – now recognised as one of the world's most powerful allies in the battle to stop climate breakdown. Even degraded peatlands have remarkable powers of recovery

Another downside is that the economic benefits have overwhelmingly flowed to shareholders and private landowners.

Community-owned turbines produce 34 times more economic benefit to local people than commercial wind farms. Yet total community renewables capacity amounts to just one per cent of total onshore wind capacity.

Scotland's vast marine area – six times the size of our landmass – will be vital to its future energy needs. The recent ScotWind offshore licensing project promises up to 25GW of new capacity – three times more than our total onshore wind capacity. And crucially, it has already generated £700m in revenues directly for the Scottish Government.

As part of a new national energy strategy, the John Muir Trust would like to see:

- Local and community-owned renewable capacity increased from 853 MW to at least 3 GW.
- The insulation of every home to Scandinavian standards to reduce energy consumption.
- A strong focus on low-impact marine renewables, such as floating turbines in deep waters distant from nesting seabirds.
- All new onshore wind to avoid peatland and other soils with carbon-sequestration potential.
- Onshore wind expansion to focus on consented but not yet constructed wind farms and on repowering projects that meet planning criteria.

Access, recreation and a just transition



Scotland's access laws are the envy of the outside world, but the days of locked gates and 'keep out notices' are not yet over. And while there are legitimate concerns over 'dirty camping' in some

areas, further exclusion zones could become the thin end of a widening wedge to justify further access restrictions.

Public access is not just about legal rights. Scotland's spectacular mountains may be world-renowned, but only a tiny minority of our own population ventures into these landscapes. For those who live in our most deprived communities, for ethnic minorities, for many women, our wildest places remain as mysterious as the dark side of the moon.

Barriers to access include poverty, low car ownership, inadequate and costly public transport, expensive accommodation, unaffordable outdoor gear and a general sense that 'The Great Outdoors' is reserved for those from a more privileged background.

The announcement by the Scottish Government of free public bus travel to everyone under 22 years is a great first step towards raising young people's horizons beyond their immediate environment. We should use our imagination to build upon that, and find new ways to open up Scotland's wild places to those excluded by their social circumstances.

Public investment directed towards bringing people and nature closer together would reap far-reaching social, health and economic dividends long into the future.

To help reconnect more of our population to wild and remote places, the John Muir Trust would like to see:

- Pilot schemes to develop affordable recreational accommodation in wild places such as huts, cabins and basic campsites.
- Improved rural public transport and an extension of free and discounted bus and rail travel.
- Every school student to have the opportunity to learn outdoor skills, including navigation, the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and basic landscape Gaelic.
- Protection and reinforcement of the 'Right to Roam,' including legal enforcement where necessary.