



## **UPLAND REALITIES, FARMING, COMMONS AND COUNTRYSIDE SPORTS**

Address by John Thorley OBE, FRAgS to Standing Conference on Countryside Sports 24<sup>th</sup> April 2008

The opportunity to speak on this subject is one which I have looked forward to for weeks and having got my marching orders on April 11<sup>th</sup> from Richard I've been struggling to know where to start.

For there is so much to talk about and to get it all sorted sequentially in some sort of priority has proven to be somewhat difficult. I will therefore divide my talk into the three legs of sustainability - economic, social and environmental and bolt onto that the growing concern with food production and the ever growing worries not only about how we feed people today and in the next few years but how we will feed them in the year 2050 when in world terms we are told the population will have expanded from 6+ to 9+ billion and UK population will have grown from just over 60 million to in excess of 90 million.

To put this into context, it is worth noting that when Winston Churchill was speaking at an NFU dinner in the mid 1950's he is recorded as having said "30 million people, all living on an island where we produce enough food for say 15 million is a spectacle of majesty and insecurity this country can ill-afford".

Today, there are 60 million mouths to feed on our island, relying on imports of food from around the world when self-sufficiency has fallen from 72% to 60% in the past 10 years in this country cannot possibly be in the interest of the population or the national economy. When we marry that to the parlous state of the economy we must quickly come to the conclusion that we are rapidly moving in the wrong direction and that unless we reverse the trend very quickly we will soon find ourselves in quite desperate straits. That is no place to be and one of the ways in which we could help the general economy is to identify with possible solutions having first of all marshalled our thoughts to identify major problems, and then define some solutions.



**With a growing population, food security is going to be an issue in perpetuity for just as we have been increasing food imports and reducing our ability to produce and export, we have effectively weakened our capability to look after our own interests insofar as food supplies are concerned in a very strategic way.**

**This has at last been recognised by our Prime Minister when he said recently “The central concerns are food security, health and rural community for our country”. He did of course say this to an audience of farmers – what he would have said to an audience of town dwellers could have been just slightly different. Nevertheless he said it and he can be held to account if things go wrong in the future.**

**So where does all this fit in with Upland Realities and farming – I believe it is quite clear that if we are to move forward as a country and take the business of food security seriously for the future then we have to start now and we have to put as much enthusiasm and passion into achieving a much higher proportion of food from our own resources. That means that we have to start to really look to our advantages as a country and think constructively about the challenges we face.**

**It is a sad reality for me that far too many Governments of all colours have identified the countryside as the playground of the great urban public, they have portrayed farmers as people who have taken money on subsidies almost as if it were under false pretences. The fact is that subsidies were paid to farmers to allow food to be supplied cheaper and in greater abundance to the public after world war II. What has happened in the last few years is that while supports have been reduced there has been a serious reluctance for food to be paid for at prices which cover costs of production. That had to stop sometime.**

**It would however seem that things are changing – they are being driven by necessity, prices of food are accelerating simply because land is being used to produce bio fuels as well as food and as land is a finite resource, i.e. it is in limited supply, there is a shortage of land for both purposes and so we get into the position of competition. Fuel price is driven by the price of world crude over which we have**



no control and accordingly that dictates the price of fuel and that in turn drives the price of raw food.

Simple isn't it? What all of that neglects to say is that while crude oil price dictates the price of bio fuel, it also dictates the price of fertiliser. We should not therefore be surprised to find that as agricultural fuel prices have jumped four-fold in the last three years so also have fertiliser prices jumped three-fold in the last eighteen months.

All of this has enormous effects for it influences the price of everything which is produced on our farms, from grain to root vegetables and including milk and meat. All staple diets are included and when I felt like complaining to our local craft baker the other day about the poor quality of his bread, I reflected and said nothing simply because I took the view that the poor chap is having to make bread from flour of a lower quality simply to make ends meet. He will have paid more for it of course but like so many others he will have been trying to maintain his profit margins in order to pay the increased council taxes and of course the other flights of fancy in the Chancellor's budget.

So where does that take us with upland farming? Frankly I believe we could be on the verge of a true renaissance insofar as the hills, uplands and more remote areas are concerned.

There are a whole variety of reasons for this – not least being the fact that the hills and uplands which have been the natural source of breeding stock for centuries, but which have had a fairly lean time for the last few years due to the fact that prices have been screwed to the floor, have an opportunity to be valued for what they are. Most are outstandingly beautiful but few have been used to produce to anything like a sensible level.

All the talk has been about over-grazing, and whereas there has been some of this, by far the greater proportion of problems have been associated with under-grazing.



**This includes bracken encroachment and while this is poisonous and unpalatable it also reduces the land area available for grass and heather. This cannot make sense for it is sensible only to consider a correct level of sustainable grazing and to find the means of establishing this level which takes into consideration the specific conditions on each and every hill.**

**The system currently in use allows for no flexibility and allows the scientists concerned to have an almost arbitrary interpretation depending on the requirements of his lords and masters. It is an open secret that the Chough for instance requires very bare ground on which to survive, so land which would under most other conditions be described as over-grazed would in fact be highly desirable for the Chough. On a neighbouring hill though the lack of heather in a sward of rough grazing over 6 – 8 inches high could merit the description of over-grazed. How can this make sense? My own view is that it cannot, and each area must be capable of carrying its own level of acceptable grazing criteria. Traditionally this was decided by farmers and graziers, today they are, in my mind wrongly, kept out of the decision on grazing levels.**

**In the world which we are moving into which, if I'm correct, will pay far greater attention to the ability of an area to produce, I take the view that whereas the higher valued lowlands will be used as much as possible to produce the more expensive crops for food and fuel, it is quite likely that they will be looking to the hills and uplands to supply the sheep and cattle which have the capacity to provide natural fertility. It would seem a logical route to me due to the fact that artificial fertiliser will be expensive and in short supply and crops cannot be grown unless the land is fertile. In many ways therefore, while we've seen a major revolution in farming and its environs over the last 100 years due partly to the 'infernal' combustion engine and the Government imposed economic pressures, we are now poised on the edge of yet another turn of the wheel as we find ourselves with the real need to produce more food at prices which, while being higher than they have been for many years, will nevertheless be acceptable to producers if we can get the balance between hill, upland and lowland right and if we can get the system back in place which places**



**greater reliance on the hills and uplands to become the drivers of the stock based fertility of the lowlands.**

**There are a number of ifs in there and whilst they are all possible, the concept is one which will need a lot of getting into place and very careful steering for a number of years beyond.**

**The question is how would all this impinge on the uplands, on hill farming, on stalking, shooting and so on. Frankly I believe that if we think we've had a revolution in agriculture in the last 100 years what we could be about to experience will see much of that pale into insignificance.**

**One of the serious cottage industries which has grown up and flourished in our country over the years has been that of the environmentalists, conservationists and general third party interests who have an undoubted and deep interest in the countryside for its ability to be the source of matters which appertain to nature, the birds, the trees, the wild mammals etc.**

**Many of the groups have become exceedingly wealthy and have been able to impose their wills on country folk in a way which has not always been to the benefit of either the country, to farming or the entire balanced structure of farming from high hill to lowland.**

**This has resulted in the economic structure of hills being challenged. With the consequent loss of farmers and shepherds we've seen the spiralling and overweening strength of these lobbyists grow in stature to the point where they have huge influence over Government policies, not only in this country, but also in Europe and beyond. It's not all bad, but - and it's a very big but - when we live in a world where the Prime Management Objective of an Agreed Management Policy of a farm in Scotland is "to create, maintain and encourage a high density of breeding raptors", we have to wonder at the sanity of the people responsible for drawing up such agreements.**



**That doesn't mean in any sense that I am antagonistic to the efforts to maintain population of raptors, but when those same raptors prey on smaller birds and become so numerous that they contribute to a reduction in our wonderful songbird population while at the same time making a very serious nuisance of themselves to the outdoor hill lambing flock, especially in the new world which we are moving into, then it really is time to take a far more balanced approach to the maintenance of high populations of raptors and an equally sceptical view of the high populations of corvids which look to sheep to provide them with a meal. How many of you have witnessed the hooded crow peck out the eyes of a birthing lamb, or have seen the tongueless head trying to get a meal after it has been attacked by a predating crow? It can't of course and has to be put out of its misery – but the fact is that while the crow can be shot with impunity, its larger more deadly cousin, the raven, is protected and the damage which ravens cause really has to be seen to be believed. Currently the Scottish Farmer newspaper is campaigning to get some controls in place, they need the support of all right thinking people, for in the quest for an economic supply of food which must include production off the hills, the farmer and the gamekeeper must have the legal right to protect their property.**

**That doesn't mean of course that there should be an open season on wildlife, nothing would fill me with greater horror, but in the same way that a farmer/shepherd has a right to shoot a dog which is found worrying his sheep, then unpalatable though it may be to some, he must also have the right to shoot birds of prey and badgers which are attacking his property. I am not setting out to be gratuitously bloodthirsty but animals and birds which cannot protect themselves need protection and I feel there is something quite incongruous about the state of the country which has laws that prevent dog fighting, laws to prevent people from maiming each other and yet protects certain species of wildlife which maim and kill farmed animals.**

**That cannot make any sense and while I'm on the subject can I say that T.B. is not the only problem which Brock the Badger visits on our farms – no certainly not, only**



last week I spoke to a hill shepherd in Dumfries who informed me that he could no longer feed his flock out on the hill – the reason being there were just too many badgers and with the high cost of food today it no longer made sense. Later he told me that on his farm he has six setts all with substantial populations and all of course needing to be fed. On the same farm there were 5 pairs of curlews last year and just the one this year – chief suspect is the badger.

So there are just some of the realities, there are plenty more, but the important issue to draw attention to is the fact that with the need to use the hills in the more traditional way of being the foundation stock producers, a more enlightened view than that which prevails would suggest that there should be a diminished role for the current influence of the conservationist. I realise of course that I risk the wrath of the powerful lobbies by saying this, but I take the view that most things ebb and flow, that every pendulum has a two-way travel and in this context the time has come to see a move back from the fawning worship at the altar of conservation. After all, what are we trying to conserve? Usually something which has been put in place by the hand of man and his animals, the farmer, shepherd, gamekeeper. And what caused the problems in the countryside which set in train the need for conservationists? In most cases Government economic and fiscal policies.

I believe these are about to change and with the move to produce more food from our own resources I believe we will see a shift of emphasis away from the promotion of policies which are designed only to maintain the countryside in an outdated aspic.

The next question is, will this be a problem and more pertinently will it be a problem in the hills and uplands? Frankly, I really don't think so, in fact the reverse could happen, it could be a tangible benefit. I say this because with the work which I'm involved with on common land, many of the problems associated have to do with the shortage of the grazing animals. The Malvern Hills under whose shadow I'm lucky enough to live, used to carry over 3,000 head of sheep and a herd of cattle, over the years due to the fact that Malvern had become a tourist attraction and people took to



walking with dogs which were not always under control, all the stock were gradually removed. The whole area became overgrown and there were some significant fires. In the last few years in order to get the area back into Good Agricultural and Environmental condition the Conservators who have charge over the well being of the Hills decided to get some stock back. By now, it has a growing herd of cattle, a growing flock of sheep and the local community some of whom had been antagonistic to the return of the stock are developing knowledge, enthusiasm and understanding of the role of the grazing animal. Even more interesting is the next step being considered which is to promote naturally fed, local Malvern lamb, mutton and beef.

**But that's an aside and I can never resist the commercial!**

The fact is that the countryside which we have been setting out to conserve has by and large been put in place by a system of farming which relied on stock providing the fertility naturally, the crops being grown to provide food for people and animals and the wild life flourishing where it didn't interfere with the needs of man and his stock. That latter point holds the key to the future for I suppose we might all agree that too high a population of anything can cause problems, the issue today is finding the acceptable balance.

Even so, the business of feeding the growing population will however grow in importance and the matter which needs to be discussed is whether a return to more food animal productive hills and uplands will have a damaging effect on the other activities of the area.

Before discussing it, we need to establish a few facts, firstly the land, be it owned, rented or common has for the most part been used for food production, for sport and for walking as a recreation. Each of these can run side by side without any harm provided there is proper understanding of the issues.



One of the big challenges for stock farmers, sheep in particular, is the fact that far too few of the new walkers really understand the potential damage they can cause simply by walking close to sheep on a hill. When they then walk with a dog off a lead the problem can be massive. It is therefore absolutely vital that people who walk on these remote areas have a care for where they are and take time to understand the fact that the sheep and dog are natural enemies and that this needs to be recognised when walking near them. Large groups walking together can cause serious problems as well especially when they are spread out across an open hill or large field. All sheep will run from both people and dogs – hill sheep are far more easily stampeded and it can take a long time to get a dispersed flock back together while lambs which have become parted from their mothers frequently fail to be reunited with subsequent serious economic loss and loss of peace of mind for the farmer. It is an important issue and whilst the vast number of walkers understand the dangers, there are significant numbers who don't. There is a growing popularity of walking and therefore new entrants to the walking activity would benefit from developing their knowledge and understanding before they get onto the hill, it's too late once they are there and become the source of a problem, equally they need to understand the problems they can cause to ground-nesting birds, is it any wonder that with growing numbers of walkers uneducated in country matters we are seeing a further challenge to curlews, to plovers and other relatively shy species.

Then we have the current issue with the ageing population of farmers, if my prediction of a return to a more profitable hill farming sector is to come to fruition I have some confidence that this will be corrected, if I'm wrong then we will very quickly see the demise of the structure of the hill farming community which has held together through thick and thin, through wartime and pestilence and through all the best efforts of many successive Governments to allow it to fall into decline and dereliction. That would be a crime of monumental proportions for one of the hidden assets of the farming community is its ability to breed a fraternity of people able and willing to take decisions on their own. In this world of the democratic, rule by committee society that we live in what an unheralded benefit that is, and how



**important if we are to get our beloved country off the political and economic ropes it's currently on.**

**I haven't actually said much about the three strands of sustainability in separate ways, each one has though been involved in the main thrust of what I've been trying to say – economics, the business has to make a profit and be attractive enough to get youngsters back on the farm, so the income and workload has to be comparable with people with other careers of similar high standing; socially there has to be a thriving community otherwise we will see yet more weekenders in the rural areas and a dead community for the rest of the week when they go back to work. That is no place to be and whilst the “second home in the country” people have a part to play, it should not be at the expense of the local indigenous populations. The value of remote cottages has been inflated well beyond the reach of local people by the incomes of weekenders who have the financial capability to own two houses. This creates a real problem and whereas the price of housing is currently being hotly debated as it goes into a downward spiral, it is one of the serious challenges for the social structure of a rural area. The environmental challenge is equally important for while I've talked about the potential for a step change in environmental issues, sadly it is likely to be some time before they come to fruition.**

**John Thorley OBE, FRAgS**

Policy Advisor  
National Sheep Association  
The Sheep Centre  
Malvern  
Worcestershire WR13 6PH  
Tel. 01684 892661  
Email [john@nationalsheep.org.uk](mailto:john@nationalsheep.org.uk)