



The Culture of Common Land

I wander along lanes, between the naked branches of bent hazel and ash in the hedgerows, alongside the river roaring with snow melt. It's a privilege to be able to walk through these spaces, to witness the gentle press of the seasons, the turning wind of winter and the silent, distant hint of Spring. Rooks sail on waves of cold air above me, two by two, curving in the shadow of the clouds, rising and falling with wings outstretched, graceful black brackets around a space of grey. Blue tits are chit-chitting as they hop from branch to branch. Down river, a dipper is biding its time, seeking a calmer patch of water, ready to dive in.

The land feels open, and my path free. But it is not that simple, I know. I think about the uplands here in Cumbria, much of which is 'common' land. It has become a real talking point for me, as I have been meeting farmers across the Lake District who have grazing rights on the commons, and talking to others who work for organisations (such as United Utilities) that own swathes of Common Land. Just who's land is it? Is it our 'shared' land? Does it 'belong' to the people who care for it? Or to those who pay for its upkeep? Or to organisations that set policies determining its management, rights of way, building permissions, stock levels, environmental schemes, tree planting programmes?

The concept of land ownership goes back many, many centuries. Ownership is a source of responsibility, and with it, much beauty and a great deal of care; just as it is the source of countless conflicts, from financial or planning disputes to wars, and even death. The practice of communal land use goes back beyond the reaches of memory or history records, and much of Cumbria's upland fells fall within the Commons – areas of land that are unfenced, where a number of farmers graze their sheep.

The term 'Common Land' has led – apparently since Tudor times – to a widespread misconception that the land belongs to everyone. A loose definition of 'commons', according to the Foundation for Common Land, is: 'areas of land where certain people have beneficial rights to use land that they do not own'. And here lies the paradox, at least in the uplands of Cumbria. These uplands do not appear the way they are because they are wild – quite the opposite, they are heavily managed. The beautiful lands of Cumbria are a 'handmade landscape' ... and the people who have crafted it, for centuries, are the farmers. Their practices of grazing, river management and forestry have become as much a part of the landscape as the hills millions enjoy each year. But it's not just about the environment: this handmade landscape is also a *cultural* landscape.

The idea of a cultural landscape is a powerful one. It helps us to appreciate that the natural land we love, and sometimes take for granted, is not all about trees, biodiversity, clean water or carbon storage: it is a living landscape which also has at its heart men, women, children and communities whose agricultural practices resonate with the land. The term has now entered common parlance, in

many ways thanks to people like James Rebanks, and Terry McCormick, who campaign for the establishment of the Lake District as a World Heritage Site.

But here's the paradox: the farming families who care for the land (which in most cases they don't own) are being put under pressure to alter their practices in ways they often don't see fit: they tell us that the changes being demanded at the very least make upland farming extremely difficult, on occasions make it unsustainable, and at worst, change its nature so drastically that the system breaks. The impact of these changes goes much farther than the farmers' yards and fields: it ripples across the whole ecosystem and into the seams of a culture that is intimately connected with the land. This is a complicated issue, something that we're looking at in more detail during the course of our year's research. But for now, the question that comes up is: to what extent are *people* considered part of our natural landscape, and the needs of traditional communities factored into policies that claim to support sustainability? Where is the place of man in the equation of nature's balance?

There's a double paradox really – as humans we all look to the land to give us what we need, to sustain us through food as well as beauty, with shelter as well as wildness. It's true that our footprints on the planet, both physical and metaphorical, in terms of land use and carbon output, are huge, and come with a great deal of pressure; but too often the spotlight that's shone to seek out a path of 'sustainability' or 'environmental management' is thrown onto the land and its habitats, with disregard for people – specifically people who are 'on the edge', i.e. not living in an urban environment, and are instead working closely with the land. Their traditions, their way of life, their knowledge, has a value that is often overlooked.

One of the leading voices speaking up for commoners, Andrew Humphries talks of farmers having 'the wisdom of the hands'. Terry McCormick, campaigner for recognition of the cultural values in Cumbria, refers to the land here as a 'handmade landscape'. Viv Lewis, secretary for the Federation of Cumbria Commoners, thinks that one of the essential, and innate, qualities of farmers, is humility, born perhaps of the fact that farming is a hard job, and there is so much you cannot be in control of. Farmers, she says, 'are in many ways, the unsung heroes – they may be bloody minded some of them – but they're like heroes.'

And the farmers – what do they say? The responses we're getting range from 'commoning's just a farce' to 'commoning is the only way to work this land'. But above all, there's a strong sense that the land is not something that is owned, and farmers – indeed all of us – play the role of custodians. Joe Relph, who farms in Borrowdale, puts it very nicely: 'We're just looking after these places. In the scheme of things it's just a blink of the eye, isn't it?' John Gorst, from United Utilities, would agree – you have to take the long view, looking after the land.

The more farmers we meet, the more ground we walk across, and the more authorities we speak to, it becomes clearer. This land, this common land, and the culture that it supports, with its people, its flora and its fauna, not to mention the demand for food from a growing population, needs farmers – not just any farmers, but the type of farmers who specialise in caring for the uplands, who know the land, the sheep, the weather, the joys and the hardships. Their voices are sometimes muffled amid the voices of lowland farming, or are squeezed out by the din of politicians and policy makers, or the calls of environmentalists. But it seems only fair that they are heard – for the good of the farmers, for the good of the land, for the good of the future.

For more information, here are some words from The Federation of Cumbria Commoners:

It has taken 450 years of hard work to make this land look untouched

Commons comprise 30% of the rough grazing in England and Wales and represent those areas which have not been legally enclosed and which have been used communally since time immemorial.

Unenclosed commons embrace some of the most beautiful and fragile elements in the uplands of England and Wales and are of paramount importance to the wider public for access, recreation, clean water, biodiversity and carbon storage amongst others. However common land is also the workplace of many hill farmers, tending their livestock through traditional husbandry practices. In turn, a traditional and naturally reared product can be provided for the consumer, a vital part of making a living under challenging conditions.

Commons include some of our most important and diverse landscapes. There are 7,000 commons of England covering nearly 400,000 ha. They are found everywhere from the highest mountains to the heart of towns and cities. No-one is ever far from a common.

Most common land by area is associated with the uplands of northern and western England, and 37% of land above the moorland line is common. Conversely, most commons by number (22% of the total) are found in south-eastern England, near and within large centres of population.

Eighty eight per cent common land is nationally or internationally designated for environmental reasons, and virtually all provides a statutory right of access on foot.

The information in this section provides an introduction to common land. Please click on the links to the right find out more about:

A Blog Piece for <http://www.landkeepers.co.uk>