

Researchers take the high road to understand changing uplands

Scientists from the universities of East Anglia, Leeds and Sheffield are embarking on £1 million new science projects in the Peak District to understand what rural policy changes mean for the future of rural livelihoods and the countryside.

Much of Britain's drinking water comes from uplands; they are important for tourism, farming and hunting, and are home to threatened plant and animal species. But the face of our uplands is changing. Farm subsidies have been overhauled; new EU rules regulate land management impacts on water quality; additional public rights of way have been opened; and traditional management practices like heather burning are receiving increasing scrutiny. The potential impacts on rural communities are huge, and nowhere more so than in the Peak District, which lies within an hour's drive for about a third of the UK population.

Chris Dean, project manager of the Moors for the Future Partnership in the Peak District National Park said: *"The collision of diverse interests in the uplands really comes to a head in the Peak District, where all the different drivers of upland change are at their most pronounced"*.

The projects in the Peak District aim to understand how upland communities can respond to these changes. The research is funded by the government's Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU) Programme, a research initiative that brings together diverse teams of natural and social scientists with local stakeholders and policy makers. The goal is to identify a choice of options for the future of the countryside that could never have been developed by any of these groups in isolation.

"No one group of natural or social scientists will ever have sufficient expertise to address all the dimensions of what is happening to the countryside" said Professor Philip Lowe of Newcastle University who heads the RELU programme.

"Instead, what we need is 'joined up' research that brings together researchers from different disciplines and that places the local knowledge and expertise of stakeholders and policy-makers at the very heart of the scientific process".

The RELU projects in the Peak District have been launched in collaboration with the Moors for the Future partnership. One project, led by Leeds University, will look at changes to the uplands with respect to moorland burning. In a successful scoping study in 2005, the researchers already uncovered a range of sometimes controversial views about moorland burning, which they fed into Defra's consultation on burning regulation. The team suggested that by getting people involved in negotiations about the way land managers can respond to future change, it may be possible to reach agreement more easily and with wider acceptance.

A second project, led by Sheffield University, is to look at the impact of changes to farm subsidies. This week, farmers received their first full payment under the new Single Farm Payment Scheme. Subsidy payments are no longer based on the amount farmers produce, but instead are tied to the area of land holdings. The researchers aim to understand how local hill farmers respond to and cope with this change.

A third project, led by the University of East Anglia, examines the implications for land management practices of changes to EU policies governing water quality.

"Attracting all of this investment in research into the Peak District is a real coup and will give local stakeholders a unique voice in the scientific and rural policy process," enthuses Jim Dixon, Peak District National Park Authority. *"Our uplands are changing fast. But it's projects like these that help us understand and make sure there is a change for the better for all of the different interest groups involved"*.

Notes for Editors:

Rural Economy and Land Use Programme

Rural areas in the UK are experiencing a period of considerable change. The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme aims to advance understanding of the challenges caused by this change today and in the future. Interdisciplinary research is being funded between 2004 and 2009 in order to inform policy and practice with choices on how to manage the countryside and rural economies.

The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme enables researchers to work together to investigate the social, economic, environmental and technological challenges faced by rural areas. The Programme will encourage social and economic vitality of rural areas and promote the protection and conservation of the rural environment.

The Programme is an unprecedented collaboration between the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). It has a budget of £24 million, with additional funding provided by the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

For more information, see: www.relu.ac.uk.

Moors for the Future Partnership

Moors for the Future is a partnership project to restore large parts of the internationally important Peak District moors. The Heritage Lottery Fund has given funding to £4.7 million making it the biggest upland conservation project in Britain. Through a programme of new initiatives, it aims to:

- Restore and conserve moorland sites most damaged by access and recreational pressures.
- Enhance the moorland heritage experience for both visitors and local people and encourage greater care of it.
- Establish a learning centre to develop conservation expertise and provide a research and educational resource available to all.

For more information, see www.moorsforthefuture.org.uk.

Further Information

For more information about the Leeds project, visit: <http://www.env.leeds.ac.uk/sustainableuplands/>

For more information about the Sheffield project, visit:

<http://www.relu.ac.uk/research/projects/SecondCall/Armsworth.htm>

For more information about the University of East Anglia project, visit:

<http://www.relu.ac.uk/research/projects/SecondCall/Sutherland.htm>

The following people are available for interview:

- Chris Dean, Moors for the Future Partnership project manager (01433 621656)
- Klaus Hubacek, Lecturer, Principle Investigator of University of Leeds Project (0113 3431631)
- Mark Reed, Lecturer, Co-Investigator in University of Leeds Project (0113 3433316/ 2659294)
- Paul Armsworth, Lecturer, Principle Investigator of Sheffield University Project (0114 2224621)
- Philip Lowe, Director, Rural Economy and Land Use Programme (0191 2226903)

