

PRESS RELEASE

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**Academics call on National Parks to take the lead in cooperative land management**

Scientists working on the UK research councils’ Rural Economy and Land Use Programme (Relu) are calling for National Parks to be environmental test beds for landscape-scale cooperation amongst farmers.

In England and Wales, National Parks have been designated for conservation and the enhancement of natural beauty and to promote understanding and enjoyment of their special qualities by the public. More recently the Government has emphasised their important role in relation to climate change, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and partnership working, while the purpose of parks in Scotland does include a commitment to sustainable development.

Could they provide more? The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme has investigated how we use land in the UK and how we might do better. One of the themes to emerge from the research is the greater environmental efficiency of landscape or catchment-scale cooperation.

The academics say that land managers in National Parks and other protected landscapes, such as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, are in a good position to build upon their existing purposes, and to test out some radical options that could help to provide more of the environmental services we need.

The researchers have explored the benefits and practicalities of communities of farms or estates acting collaboratively, for example, to conserve farmland birds, maximise carbon storage in peat land, manage game, protect water quality and control flood waters.

But such initiatives have often failed in the past, so the research has also investigated the incentives and new types of contractual arrangements that might be required, how payments for this kind of agri-environmental improvement might be linked to results, and how, in a partnership system, rewards might be distributed.

They advocate a new “Entry Level Stewardship Plus” agri-environment scheme, based on these principles and say that protected areas, where land managers already have a basis for cooperative working, could provide a model.

Professor Philip Lowe, Director of the Rural Economy and Land Use Programme said: “We should be looking for much better returns on our investment in agri-environment schemes and from our protected areas, and Relu research suggests that incentives for land managers to work together at landscape scale could help to achieve this.

“Recent policy reviews indicate that the Government might be receptive. The Uplands Policy Review was positive about a landscape-scale approach to land management, while the Natural Environment White Paper stressed that protected areas should be properly valued, and promises an action plan to expand markets and schemes in which payments are made by beneficiaries to the providers of natural services. The Growth Review currently being carried out by the Government also seeks to realise the value of natural capital.

“But the problem in the past for this kind of approach in the UK has been that we don’t have an established tradition of farmers working cooperatively, as happens in some other European countries, so we need organisations that can be pathfinders. National Parks and AONBs are particularly well placed to do this. They could play a key role in the formation and support of farmers’ groups and give a lead in developing landscape-scale initiatives.”

Notes for editors:

1. The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme is an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), with additional funding provided by the Scottish Government and Defra. See [www.relu.ac.uk](http://www.relu.ac.uk) for more information about the Relu programme.
2. [A Relu/NRN event](http://www.northernruralnetwork.co.uk/event/14+Sep+11+-+UPLANDS/50) on the Uplands and the role of the national parks will take place in the [Lindisfarne Room, King’s Road Centre, Newcastle University](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/about/visit/maps.htm) from 9.15-16.00 hrs in on 14 September 2011. Members of the press are welcome to attend.
3. More information about this topic is available in Relu’s policy and [practice note no 33](http://www.relu.ac.uk/news/policy%20and%20practice%20notes/33%20Carroll/13549%20RELU%20PP33_WEB.pdf).
4. For any further information contact [relu@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:relu@ncl.ac.uk), tel 0191 222 6903.

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