Landscape Leaders Speech - Soil Association

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Hi everyone. Thank you for being here tonight and I am delighted to be speaking to you. By coming on this Landscape Leaders course, you are representing the future of land ownership, and the leadership that Scotland desperately needs for its wildlife and people.

I recently read a book called The Last Wolf by Jim Crumley. There is one paragraph that really stands out to me, as the author describes the transformational changes to the landscape that occurred in the years after the wolves came back. In it, he wrote:

*In the spring of the second year after the wolves came, we saw the mountain start to change colour. Where the deer has been, where they smothered - suffocated - the growth, bit and bit again the heather-high trees (twenty years old, twenty inches high and going nowhere until at last they were bitten to death) . . . in that second spring we saw the evening sun illuminate the green haze, low on the land. At first we didn’t understand its meaning, so we climbed from the floor of the glen to the old deer terrace, and we found it’s meaning: fresh, sweet, young, vivid, green grass. The wolves by keeping the deer constantly on the move, had restored to the mountain a lost meadow. And as the spring advanced, flowers! Splashes of white and yellow and blue, and the grass ankle-deep. And with every new season after that, the new growth summoned others to the change: butterflies, moths, berries, berry-and-butterfly-eating birds; then the first new trees.*

In The Last Wolf, Jim Crumley tells the story of the wolf, dispelling many of the myths that surrounds this apex predator and calling for its return to the Scottish Highlands.

Here in Scotland, we not only killed off wolves, but also bears, lynx, beavers, wild boar and many other species. We have, however, reintroduced the wild boar and the small, vegetarian beaver, which, for some reason, many landowners still seem unable to deal with without resorting to lethal methods of control. This shows us clearly that we can’t bring back animals without the support and involvement of local communities. However, there is now a need to go much faster and start bringing back our missing native species because they are no longer a nice to have: they are now a necessity; a necessity in a time of ecological crisis.

We have unbalanced our natural systems so much that we are one of the most ecologically depleted countries in the world. Much of Scotland is a barren, ecological desert, devoid of wildlife and yet this depleted landscape is celebrated around the world.

When my family and I moved back to Scotland, I also thought that these bare hills were in their natural state. For all I knew, this was what it had always been like and I was never told anything else. It was a few years later when I finally understood that this isn’t normal. Scotland used to be covered in temperate rainforest, and iconic animals like the wolf, the lynx and the bear, which I’d only ever read about in books and seen in nature programs, actually lived here. Whenever I cross Rannoch Moor or travel through Glencoe, it is very easy to imagine the eerie howl of a pack of wolves: a sound that would once have echoed across Scotland’s landscape only a few centuries ago.

Around 12 to 18% of Scotland and 8% of Britain is managed for grouse shooting, a sport where the land is burnt to sustain high concentrations of one species of bird: the red grouse. Despite the considerable amount of land being used for this one purpose, grouse moors in Britain contribute a tiny 0.005% to GDP and directly account for 1,800 jobs. In comparison, eco-tourism in Scotland alone is estimated to produce £1.4 billion per year and almost 40,000 jobs.

14.5% of Scotland is managed for deer stalking. Because we wiped out all their predators many centuries ago, red deer numbers have grown exponentially to the 400,000 we have today and coupled with six million sheep, the land is being grazed to death.

According to the UK State of Nature Report released in 2019, 48% of Scottish species have declined in the last ten years and 11% are at risk of being lost forever… except the term “lost” implies that our precious wildlife has disappeared suddenly with us none the wiser as to how. That is far from the truth. We are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction, or more accurately, the first great extermination and it is thought that up to 200 hundred species go extinct every single day. The extinction rate is up to ten thousand times faster than what is considered normal. 60% of global vertebrate populations have declined since 1970.

As a young person, I am seen as “the future” but it is actually very hard for me to have a say in what I want that future to be like. Obviously, I can’t vote within the current political system, so I have to do what I can through my activism and campaigning. What we do or don’t do today will affect my entire life and the lives of future generations. The climate and ecological crises are the greatest threats humanity has ever faced but they are being treated as futuristic issues that may or may not affect us.

My love of the natural world and my frustration that nothing was happening culminated with me standing outside my school on the morning of Friday, January 11th 2019. It was my very first school strike for the climate and I have been striking every Friday since that day. I am not doing this because I want to skip school or because I want to be famous. I am doing this to wake our leaders up.

For too long we have been closing our eyes and shutting our minds to the devastation that humanity is inflicting on this planet, but people are waking up. On the 20th and 27th of September last year, over 7 and a half million people went on strike for the climate. The Fridays For Future movement, started by 17 year old Greta Thunberg over 1 and a half years ago, has snowballed through countries and across continents to become one of the biggest environmental movements in human history. When millions of children go out on strike, some grownups tell us to go back to school because they do not want to listen to what we are saying. For them, the truth is too uncomfortable.

On January 1st 2018, the world had 420 gigatonnes of CO2 left to emit to have a 67% chance of staying below 1.5 degrees of warming. Today, that budget is already below 350 gigatonnes and will be gone in less than eight years. We have to revolutionize all aspects of our society in the smallest amount of time that you could possibly imagine. It will require an unprecedented systemic transformation. But if we do not act, then the climate crisis may spiral out of human control by 2030. The world needs to rapidly ramp down our consumption of fossil fuels and industrialized countries must reach zero emissions much sooner than the popular dates of 2050 or 2045.

But even getting to zero emissions will not be enough to prevent the collapse of our society unless we also realise that we can’t continue to exploit the natural world the way we do today. Our life support systems make up the foundations of our civilisation and if we destroy those systems, it will come crashing down. We need to end our war on nature. We can’t continue chopping away at the tree of life and acting as though we have infinite resources on a finite planet - in other words, the “green”, “sustainable” economic growth that politicians and business leaders are always talking about, is suicidal. We need degrowth.

The UK’s Earth overshoot day falls on the 17th of May. This means that if everyone on the planet lived like us, we would use up the resources of 2.7 planets every year. Not only is this stealing 1.7 planet’s worth of resources from future generations, but it is stealing from people living today in less fortunate parts of the world.

As land owners and managers, you have an enormous amount of power and with this comes a great responsibility. We cannot stop the breakdown of biodiversity and the climate without you. We cannot change the course of the future without you.

I dream of being a writer when I’m older. Through stories, I hope to spread awareness about the environmental issues facing us. Through stories, we can spark people’s imaginations and realise that our own futures’ don’t have to be confined within four brick walls. Through stories, we could change the world. The narrative around what Scotland is and what it could be is being told by more and more conservationists and people are starting to understand that we need to change. And we can’t do it without you.

Thank you.

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Lochaber Times Column: A Cry for the Wild

<https://www.obantimes.co.uk/2020/01/16/a-cry-for-the-wild-holly-gillibrand/>

Useful links for landscape rewilding/restoration projects in Scotland:

<https://www.scotlandbigpicture.com/>

<http://cairngormsconnect.org.uk/>

<https://alladale.com/rewilding/>