



# Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association

26<sup>th</sup> March 2011

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to you as Chairman of the Herdwick Sheep Breeder's Association (HSBA) to make you aware of our deep concern about current policy initiatives regarding the Lake District landscape, and particularly the policy of de-stocking the fells through Entry Level and Higher Level Stewardship schemes.

We believe that unless the implementation of these policies is done with much greater sensitivity and sophistication in the future then our unique cultural tradition will be destroyed in less than a generation. Decisions are being made at present that will have profoundly damaging effects on the viability and sustainability of some of the most important Herdwick farms in the Lake District.

We would like this approach to be reviewed with immediate effect, and our concerns addressed about the damage that we see being created, albeit unintentionally, by otherwise well-meaning attempts to improve the biodiversity and eco-system services value of the Lake District fells.

The Herdwick Sheep Breeder's Association represents the interests of 217 members, of which 159 actively farm in Cumbria and who collectively represent perhaps the most important traditional community in the Lake District. Through our farming traditions we manage the vast majority of the Lake District upland landscape, including its most iconic fells and valleys. We represent a cultural tradition that has roots stretching back over 5000 years to when mankind first settled in this landscape. Our living cultural tradition was identified by William Wordsworth two hundred years ago as the foundation of all that is unique and special in the Lake District. Many of our members farm the properties left by Beatrix Potter to the National Trust. The emerging UNESCO World Heritage Site nomination for the Lake District makes quite clear that our ancient form of farming is at the heart of the 'outstanding universal value' that makes this a globally important cultural landscape.

The World Heritage Site nomination document opens with the following passage:

**"The English Lake District is the birthplace of what landscape means to the modern world. Its unique landscape, dominated by a long-standing, living tradition of upland pastoral farming, became renowned in the 18th century for its Picturesque views and subsequently inspired the Romantic poets, including William Wordsworth (1770-1850), who resided in the area".**

And soon afterwards lists, **"The living tradition of sheep farming based on the Herdwick and other local breeds and the associated cultural heritage of this tradition"** as a key element in the 'outstanding universal value' of the landscape. In short, our members sustain and uphold the cultural traditions of the Lake District that have made it the most loved of English landscapes. Because of the importance of our cultural tradition to this landscape we believe that it needs to be better understood, respected, and supported. As Terry McCormick, of the Cumbria Hill Farming Project, has stated, **"Without hill farmers, the cultural landscape is a body without a beating heart and bodies in this condition do not last too long"**.

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We are not a campaigning organisation, and we do not lightly get involved in policy issues, so we hope that you will listen to us when we take this step of raising our concerns about matters that we believe to be of the utmost importance. Our view is supported by a number of respected authorities on cultural landscapes. Susan Denyer (ICOMOS) is the UK's adviser to UNESCO on cultural World Heritage sites, and is respected internationally for her work on the subject. She recently expressed her concerns about the Lake District,

**“This decline in numbers of people living and working on the land means that there is now an inadequate structure to allow communal management of some of the key elements such as walls, hedges, watercourses and grazed common fells. In many valleys the bones of the landscape survive but are hanging on by a thread, as the social and economic systems that supported them are weakening.”**

We recognise that agriculture will evolve, and that changes are necessary, including, sometimes, reductions in the stocking density of common land. We also recognise that there are other interests in this landscape than simply sheep farming, and other perspectives from our own, but we are as one in our current belief that the destocking of the Lakeland fells is being done with insufficient understanding of the social, cultural and economic impacts, and that even the environmental evidence provided for such interventions is far from convincing. We believe that this policy agenda is ideologically driven, and is pursued with blindness to the impacts on sheep farming, which is often considered to be a 'necessary casualty' of environmental improvements. It also fails to take into consideration the governments commitment to Farm Animal Genetic Resources (FanGR) and the recent publication of Defra's Native Breeds at Risk which includes the Herdwick. The current attitude of the Lake District National Park Authority is effectively that hill farming does not matter. The authority has little or no understanding of hill sheep farming, something which given its huge cultural, social, economic and environmental importance is unacceptable.

We are deeply concerned about the harm being done to this unique social, cultural and economic system by well-intentioned but ultimately harmful policies. There is a pressing need to reconsider the current approach before untold damage is done to a cultural and socio-economic system that has evolved over the past 5000 or more years. This is, as it has been for thousands of years, a man-made and productive landscape that is heavily reliant upon productive agriculture to sustain its land management and its unique cultural traditions.

The current de-stocking policy will thus have a catastrophic effect on the opportunities open to young Herdwick breeders and stockmen, we suspect that this damage is not well understood by policymakers. There are worryingly small numbers of young people entering hill farming, and de-stocking threatens to further reduce the opportunities and need for skilled and knowledgeable shepherds. Scottish Agricultural College data suggests that every time c.500 sheep are removed from the Lake District Fells the need for a shepherd is removed, not just in the short-term, but potentially forever, with profound impacts on the ability to collectively manage the commons.

De-stocking also threatens the viability of our application for EU **Protected Designation of Origin** (PDO) which is at an advanced stage. If successful, which we have every reason to believe it will be, the Herdwick will be the first sheep breed in England to achieve this coveted status.

We would also highlight that we represent a significant economic community. The 2009 DEFRA Farm Business Survey suggests that the 159 Cumbrian farmers we represent employ more than 200 people, have an annual output of £11.7 million, and generate approximately £6.7 million from marketed agricultural products. The Survey also reveals that such farms result in more than £15,000 of unpaid labour per year to manage the land and livestock. This alone would make the unpaid labour of our members one of the largest single investments made into the Lake District each year. We are concerned that this considerable productive economic activity is being limited and reduced at a time when global food demand is set to soar, and when our cultural heritage is being put to UNESCO as a potential World Heritage Site.

The importance of stockmanship and pride in this culture cannot be underestimated, as Neil Johnson of the National Trust recently stated **'The thing that motivates people to manage this landscape for such meagre financial rewards is love of sheep...'** We understand that this might be a difficult concept for others to understand but it is at the heart of how this landscape evolved, and how it continues to be sustained.

The Government talks of working in partnership and we believe we have a great deal to offer and attach those issues which must be addressed with immediate effect. We very much hope that you will respond to our concerns, and work with us to address them.

Yours sincerely

William Rawling

Chairman Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association

## **Concerns raised by the Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association on the effect of destocking of Herdwick sheep from the Lake District Fells**

### **An immediate review of problem cases**

We are aware of a number of commons where de-stocking is creating significant problems for sheep farming businesses, problems that threaten the viability and sustainability of the farm unit. Many of these farms are owned by the National Trust, and are some of the most important Herdwick farms in the Lake District with some of the finest Herdwick sheep breeders with stocks of sheep that have had a major impact on the breed. These farms in the heartlands of the Lake District are subject to an endless series of challenges from environmental or land management organisations. The current challenge is the reduction of sheep by over 30%. These reductions severely reduce the farm's stock on the fells and we believe that this policy effectively limits the scale of the farming businesses as to make the holdings unviable. It demonstrates a lack of understanding of the unique nature of sheep farming in the high fells of the Lake District. Because of the importance of such financial support to individual farm businesses, it is very difficult and risky for individuals to stand against the policies, as the risk is one of losing the financial support entirely.

*We would invite the senior management of stakeholder organisations to come and investigate these cases, to understand the farming practices that apply and to witness the impacts that the policy can have on farms of real significance to our cultural tradition.*

### **Better cost-benefit analysis of the impacts of de-stocking interventions**

Upland commons are complex, and locally distinctive, socio-economic systems. We believe that effective decisions about de-stocking require more comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of the impact on the common, the businesses that have commoner rights, the stocks of sheep that exist on the common, their geographic focus, and their contribution to the environment, and the impact on individual farms and farm succession of de-stocking. We believe that in some cases de-stocking will be possible and desirable for all concerned whilst in other cases the impact may be too damaging to fragile ancient human ecological systems. Farm succession of Herdwick farms is such a challenging issue that this needs to be taken into account in de-stocking decisions. We would also point out that global food demand is set to rise by 40% by 2020, and that DEFRA is already talking about 'sustainable intensification' in British agriculture.

*We would like to see stakeholder organisations invest in better research and analysis of the farming systems to ensure that they are better understood as a basis for more effective policy and bio-security interventions.*

### **Research on unintended consequences of de-stocking**

We are concerned that in the name of achieving one policy outcome, a number of other unintended consequences are being created in our communities. We believe that this is not only deeply damaging to our cultural tradition and our business's viability, but is also actually deeply flawed from an 'eco-system services' or 'green infrastructure' perspective. The green infrastructure approach, in particular, identifies the multi-functional nature of the outputs from environmental assets. Research undertaken on the Bassenthwaite catchment for Natural England in 2010 showed clearly that productive agriculture remains an extremely important output from this landscape, and that to date there are few market incentives or payments for eco-system services from our land.

*We would like to see stakeholder organisations think and act more holistically with regard to commons, to move beyond a narrow focus on biodiversity to a more human-focused approach to what is a cultural landscape with an ancient cultural tradition.*

### **Better training and education of policy makers and field officers**

There is a pressing need for more training for officers in the organisations concerned in the complexities of landscape management, and the unique attributes of this Lake District landscape in particular. Farmers and academics that have devoted their lives to this subject find the sheer complexity of these systems humbling – which necessitates a high degree of training and education of policy makers and field officers. This is not an area where effective policy can be made, or implemented without in-depth understanding of the harm that can be done with clumsy interventions.

*We would extend an offer to stakeholder organisations to explain the issues and present the evidence that underpins the current approach, and discuss how training might be delivered in the future with our assistance.*

### **A change of attitude/ethos**

We believe that the problem we face is partly one of institutional ignorance, or occasionally arrogance, and that a change of attitude/ethos is needed to give greater respect to existing land managers, and their evolved practices and knowledge. This is our landscape, and our cultural tradition, and we believe it is time that our perspective, knowledge and experience were given the respect and understanding that they warrant.

*There is a body of best practice from around the world that can be learnt from about how to engage with indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. Sustainability requires the human/community element to work well, and this requires respect and understanding.*