



Environment and Land Reform: Examining the Relations Between Non-Governmental Organisations and Community Groups



AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND MARINE

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Executive summary

Purpose

Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) own 2.6% of land in Scotland and they play a crucial role in setting an example of progressive and sustainable land management. In their work, NGOs interact with local communities living on and nearby their estates. The purpose of this project was to examine the relations between NGOs and community groups in the light of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016.

Background

This project aims to advance the understanding of the existing challenges and the potential for cooperation between Environmental NGOs and relevant community groups in the recent policy context. Drawing on the research findings, the report outlines the main challenges and puts forward recommendations on how partnerships between the different stakeholders can be supported.

Key findings

Challenges for partnerships between Non-Governmental Organisations and community groups

- Some NGOs struggle to reconcile their mission and commitments made to their wider membership with the local needs of the communities living in and around their estates. The perceived conflict of interests can negatively affect prospective collaborations.
- The difference in reconciling NGOs' mission and community needs are reflected in communication and engagement between NGOs and community groups. How consultations with the communities are planned and conducted is one symptom of this wider issue. NGOs interviewed engage in consultations with local communities but there is little evidence to suggest that communities are actively involved in planning and preparation of long-term strategy.
- Overall, NGOs' interviewed argue that from their perspective, change of ownership can negatively affect land management. The interviewees highlighted that Land Reform prioritises ownership over the type and style of management and that communities that come into land ownership often struggle to access resources for improving land management.

Opportunities, alternative approaches and potential ways forward

- Evidence from the case studies showed that effective communication, between stakeholders and with the local community, was key to overcoming differing priorities and finding common purpose from which mutually beneficial compromises were established and effective collaboration grew.
- This research found that collaborative ownership can offer opportunities for both the NGO sector and the local community. For communities, working in partnership with NGOs opens a chance to own land in areas of high private land concentration, creates job, and provides training opportunities. For NGOs, it offers access to assets at a set price, an on-going PR value, and opportunities for bottom-up learning.
- Moreover, the existing examples of co-creative partnerships and engagements that take people's needs and concerns as a starting point, offer alternative approaches to community consultation. With adequate planning, communication, and compromise, conservation objectives can be inter-dependent rather than opposing to community needs. This, of course, does not mean there are always aligned, and continuous dialogue remains an important part of partnerships. Research shows that there is a momentum to formalise and systematise community engagement from both within and beyond charitable organisations.
- There are untapped benefits of conservation work in urban areas. These share fundamental similarities with rural projects but are distinct and should be designed accordingly. Urban projects particularly benefit when staff, NGOs and community group members, are embedded in the community, which helps them be more aware of the concerns and challenges for a project so they can design relevant and engaging projects for that specific area.

Recommendations

- **A networked approach**, whereby local assets and local knowledge is augmented by external assets and resources, is likely to be the most effective way to bridge the gap in resources and expertise when land is transferred to community groups.
- **Creating place-based plans** and developing community projects, that are created by and for the local community, are more likely to encourage sustained community buy in and engagement with the project, helping to ensure long-term viability.
- NGOs should engage in '**bottom up**' communication as opposed to 'top down'. Efforts should be made to *engage* the community as opposed to

informing them of plans. This is particularly relevant in the context of designing public consultations.

- NGO senior staff should make efforts to **be accessible** to community groups living on their estates. This will help break down barriers and change perceptions, find common ground and shared purpose, and address engrained working patterns and practices that may hinder collaboration.
- Scottish Land Commission is currently finalising a Code of Practice¹. Therefore, there is a momentum to formalise and systematise community engagement from both within and beyond. Once the engagement guideline is published, it will be important to put mechanisms in place to hold organisations accountable to the new requirements.

¹ Many interviewees expressed concern that there is a separate code of practice for charitable organisations and for private landowners, as this sets the two unnecessarily apart.

1. Introduction

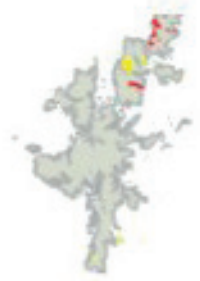
Different types of owners have acquired Scottish estates and land, including corporate bodies, overseas owners, and environmental organisations² (Fig. 1 overleaf). Eight of these environmental organisations own a combined total of 202,391 ha or the equivalent of 2.6% of Scotland's total land area. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs') owned and managed land is relatively widely distributed, with particularly large areas evident in the Cairngorms, the Flow Country and the West Highlands.

Direct purchase of land has been motivated by a number of reasons, including: protecting and restoring wildlife, habitats, and outstanding scenery; responding to threats from inappropriate development; ensuring access to nature for the public³. NGOs continue to buy land, however their objectives and target areas tend to evolve. For example, with the Land Reform Act 2003 and the right to roam, purchasing land to ensure public access to nature became less of a priority. Instead, attention of some of the NGOs has now shifted to other targets, such as unprotected and unlisted heritage. For other NGOs, the strategic priorities now focus on connecting and expanding their existing estates.

On their estates, NGOs have to work together with tenants and residents living within or nearby the protected areas. Evidence shows that landowning NGOs in Scotland engage in a range of activities relating to community engagement and partnership working. Among others, Scottish Wildlife Trust engages in collaborative working and conducts large-scale partnership initiatives, including Cumbernauld Living Landscape initiative. John Muir Trust advises communities and supports communities that recently came into community land ownership, including for example Knoydart Foundation. In Loch Arkaig, Woodland Trust joined up with Arkaig Community Forest in a collaborative ownership of woodlands.

² <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/05/2852/298170>

³ Mc Morran, R., Glass, J, Frankland, D. (2013) Evidence for Scotland's Land Reform Policy Review (2012-2014) - *The socioeconomic benefits of the ownership and management of land by environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs)*. Commissioned report prepared by the Centre for Mountain Studies, Perth College-University of Highlands and Islands.



Map showing land owned and managed by NGOs in Scotland

Total area of NGO owned land: 202,391 ha
Total % of Scotland owned by NGO: 2.57 %

Map created: 12/03/2013

Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2011

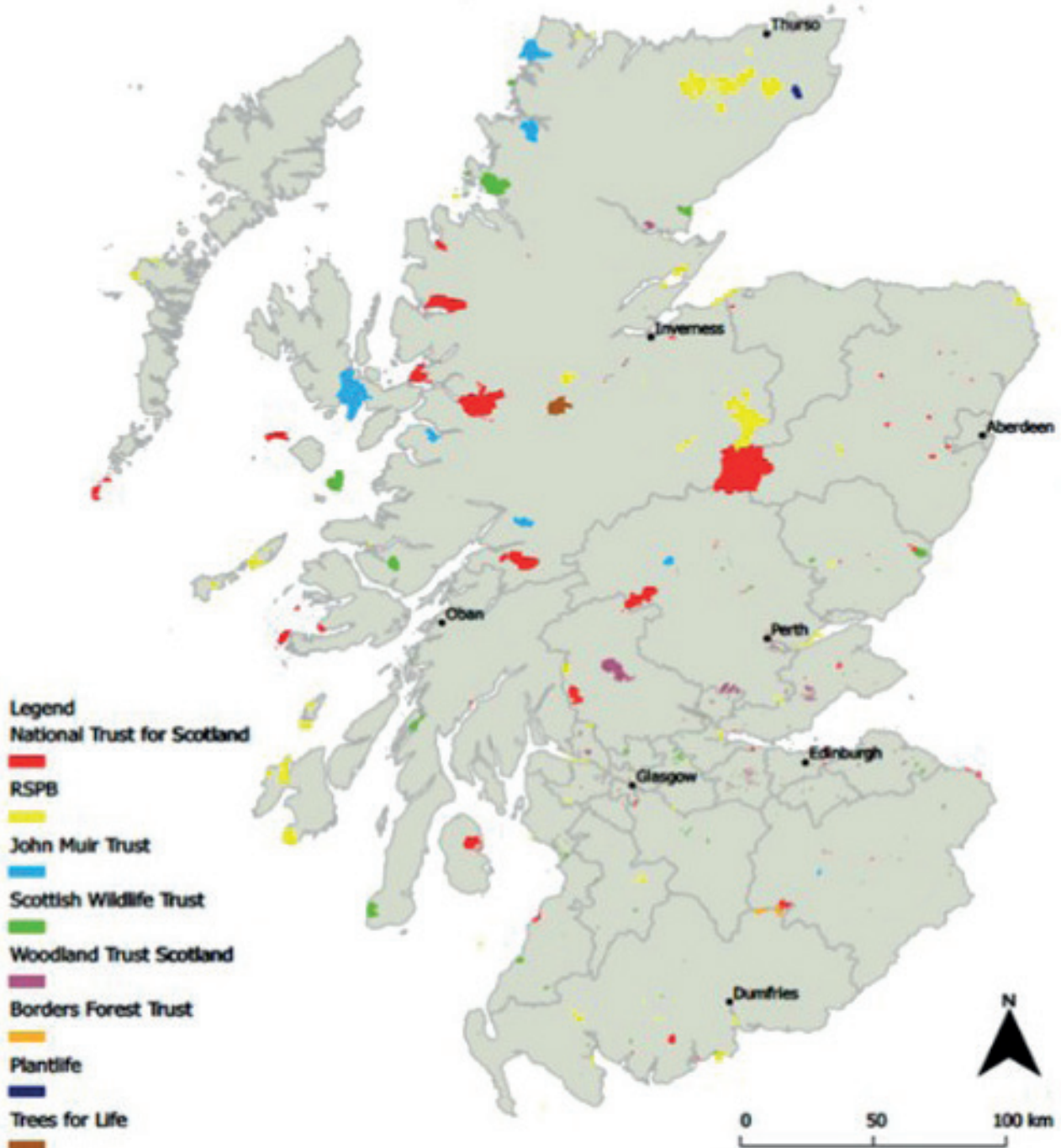


Figure 1: Map of land ownership in Scotland

Moreover, the majority of NGOs in Scotland employ local community engagement officers and/or rangers and establish local and regional working groups. Some environmental NGOs also engage in direct partnership working with communities, including supporting the purchase and management of community land and supporting the development of unique community-based ecosystem restoration initiatives⁴.

Despite these engagements, environmental NGOs have been subject to criticisms regarding: the lack of formal definition of their roles; a lack of accountability; a lack of awareness and understanding of local knowledge in the places they work; and overlooking local existing capacities and responsibilities⁵.

As contemporary research on conservation demonstrates, biodiversity thrives when local people have legally recognised rights to manage and protect their land. The previous model, favoured by large organisations, that ecosystems needed to function in isolation, devoid of people, ignores the growing evidence of the contrary⁶.

There is now a push in many environmental protection studies to move away from the idea of a 'preserved wilderness' towards one of the 'working wild' where active engagement with, and sustainable consumption of, the environment play key roles in local development⁷. In Scotland, the cases of North Harris and Gigha demonstrate that when local communities are given rights to their land, they can rework the concepts of nature and sustainability by both protecting the environment and supporting livelihoods⁸.

This project was developed in this policy context, in line with contemporary conservation studies approaches, and in relation to the current policy developments. The overall aim of the project was:

(i) to assess the existing collaborations between Environmental NGOs and community groups. Of particular interest was the perceptions of possible divergence of purpose between NGOs and community groups but also perceived common purpose where the two groups work together.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Mc Morran, R. and Glass J. (2003). *Buying nature: a review of environmental NGO landownership in Lairds, land and sustainability Scottish perspectives on upland management*.ed. Glass, J., Price, M., & Warren, C. p. 173.

⁶ Satsangi, M. (2009). 'Community Land Ownership, Housing and Sustainable Rural Communities'. *Planning Practice and Research* 24 (2), pp. 251–62.

⁷ Glass, J., Price, M., & Warren, C. (2013). *Lairds, land and sustainability Scottish perspectives on upland management*.

⁸ Mackenzie, F. (2013). *Places of possibility: Property, nature and community land ownership*. Antipode book series.

(ii) and to provide recommendations on how more effective communication and cooperation between the stakeholders can be fostered to facilitate productive current and future collaborations for the benefit of all.

To achieve that, the project relied on qualitative methodology, prioritising in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in environmental NGOs and community groups. The report is structured around the key themes relating to the perceptions of possible divergence of purpose between NGOs and community groups but also perceived common purpose where the two groups may conceivably work together.

The analysis of the stakeholder's interviews revealed main themes, which will be discussed in the analytical section of the report. In the last section, examples of progressive collaborations and engagements between NGOs and communities will be presented. The report argues that despite major challenges, collaborative partnerships between NGOs and local communities open a wide range of opportunities for progressive models of land ownership and management.

2. Policy context

In 2014, the Scottish Government commissioned two significant reviews of legislation and policy in relation to land – the Land Reform Review and the Agricultural Holdings Legislation Review. Their recommendations fed directly into the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016.

Community ownership⁹ is at the heart of the Scottish Government's community empowerment agenda, and Principle 3 of the recently published Scottish Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement¹⁰ states that more local communities should have the opportunity to own, lease or use buildings and land which can contribute to their community's wellbeing and future development.

The benefits of community land ownership are multiple. Research by Community Land Scotland shows that when communities buy their land, they can invest profits back into the community, work towards the reversal of population decline, and create jobs¹¹. Moreover, people living on community owned land report that they feel more empowered in local decision-making and more connected with their local area.

At the end of June 2017, there were 562,230 acres of land estimated to be in community ownership in Scotland¹², which stands for 2.9% of the total land area. The majority of community owned land has been acquired in the form of whole estates, predominantly crofting estates, and forestry or woodland. The Scottish Government supports communities who have the ambition to take on ownership of land by providing funding schemes, grants, and policy advice.

To facilitate the progress of Land Reform, the Scottish Government established the SLC in 2017. In their work, SLC identified community engagement as one of their strategic priorities. The SLC is currently preparing Code of Practice guidelines for all landowners which is due to be published at the end of 2018.

This project aims to advance the understanding of the existing challenges and the potential for cooperation between Environmental NGOs and relevant community groups in this recent policy context. NGOs own and manage 2.6% of land in Scotland - only 0.3% less than all community groups put together. Considering their reach, influence, and expertise, Environmental NGOs can play an important role in facilitating and supporting community land ownership. Drawing on the research findings, the report outlines the main challenges and puts forward recommendations on how partnerships between the different stakeholders can be supported.

⁹ <https://www.gov.scot/Topics/farmingrural/Rural/rural-land/right-to-buy/Community>

¹⁰ <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00525166.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.communitylandscotland.org.uk/2016/03/community-land-ownership-the-difference-it-makes/>

¹² <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Agriculture-Fisheries/Publications/CommunityOwnership>

3. Methods

The objective of the research was to understand how people in community groups and environmental NGOs conceptualise how collaborations and partnerships should be structured and conducted. The essence of this research revolved around people's opinions and first-hand knowledge and experience. This type of data is difficult to capture in a quantitative research approach, which relies on structured responses gleaned mostly from surveys. Qualitative methods allow for building trust and personal connections, which are necessary for learning about people's opinions and experiences.

In this project, the primary research method used was semi-structured interviews. This method enhances the learning process - in semi-structured interviews, new information shared by the participants can be easily integrated into the interview guide and included in the ensuing questions. As such, participants can contribute to the research design, enhancing mutual learning and cooperation between the researcher and the participants.

In total, 18 interviews were conducted, 13 with representatives from NGOs, and five at the case study community organisations. 17 conducted face-to-face and 1 over the phone, lasting an average length of 44min, with 8 participants being female and 10 male. The interviews took place in Edinburgh, Inverness, Musselburgh, Glengarry and Loch Arkaig. Research participants were selected following the existing reports about NGOs' land ownership and community engagement. Contact details were received from the Land Policy team and colleagues from RESAS department.

Following the first round of interviews, snowball sampling method was employed to establish further connections. The case studies were selected following recommendations from the Scottish Government policy unit to include both rural and urban examples. Other contacts were shared by the academic experts interviewed. The number of participants was limited due to the short duration of the project, however the majority of key stakeholders participated in the research.

NGOs and interview participants

- *RSPB Scotland and Scottish Environment LINK*
- *John Muir Trust*
- *National Trust for Scotland (2* participants)*
- *Scottish Wildlife Trust*
- *Scottish Community Alliance*
- *Scottish Land Commission*
- *Scottish Land and Estates*
- *An expert from Perth University*
- *An expert from Scottish Rural College*
- *National Trust for Scotland's estate in Balmacara (phone, 1*)*
- *An independent consultant*
- *Glengarry Community Woodlands*

Case Studies

- *Arkaig Community Forest and Woodland Trust (3*) (Appendix 1 p.27)*
- *Cumbernauld Living Landscape (2*) (Appendix 2 p.29)*

Data management

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and anonymised. The data was encrypted and safely stored and it will be destroyed within 24 months.

4. Challenges for partnerships between NGOs and community groups

This section examines the perceived tensions between community needs and NGOs' mission. The aim of the chapter is to show the existing perceptions on both sides and to highlight the obstacles that the two groups face while working together.

4.1 Reconciling community needs with NGOs' mission

Research conducted shows that there is evidence of desire in the environmental NGO sector to engage communities, to work in partnerships, and to set standards of good practice. However, on the ground, the organisations often face a clash of interests between their agenda and the needs and expectations of the local people. As one interviewee explained: *'People who live on the sites that we own and manage might not have a direct interest in conservation'*.

At same time, the NGOs have to manage their members' interest, who expect conservation and environmental protection to be their top priority. The membership of large environmental NGOs is often removed from the concerns of the local communities. In result, the expectations that funders and members have of what NGOs should deliver might be at times in opposition to what people who live in the conservation areas consider sustainable. According to one interviewee: *'They [NGOs] tend to see their community of interest as their membership. The people on the ground [...] their interests don't matter, which leads to negative views of the organisation'*.

In a discussion about the mechanisms in place to address the needs and concerns of local tenants, one NGO employee explained the difficulties of navigating the different expectations:

'I don't wish to just defend [our organisation], but it is not just a private interest, we manage all of our properties on behalf of all the people in Scotland, so all of our properties we own, we own on behalf of all the people of Scotland, and we try to take that into account. But there may be cases where the interest of the people of Scotland conflicts with the interest of the local community [...]'.

As this quote illustrates, in some cases, a wider conservation agenda is prioritised over the concerns of the local population. NGOs find themselves in extremely difficult circumstances, where they feel that they are unable to satisfy the needs of all stakeholders. In result, they tend to prioritise the expectations of funders and members, rather than the local communities living on and around their estates. An inability to reconcile these conflicting needs and concerns emerged as an important theme in this research.

4.2 Public consultations and challenges with communication and engagement

Local communities are diverse places. Landowners, be that private or public or even a community, often find engaging with communities challenging. In contrast to private landowners who have a unified voice and a representative body that responds to their concerns, local communities are diverse, disperse and non-unified. There are sometimes conflicting views within the communities themselves and it takes time and experience to listen to people and work with them. As one of the interviewees explained:

‘There is an assumption, status quo, by default, you talk to authorities, or the local council, local newspaper, but actually all of those are now being challenged, because there are more organisations and communities getting together, and when you actually try and find out what people think, other than assuming you know what they think, there are many surprises’

The challenges in reconciling NGOs’ mission and community needs are reflected in how consultations with the community are planned and conducted. NGOs interviewed engage in consultations with local communities but there is little evidence to suggest that communities were actually involved in planning and preparation of long-term strategy. The two groups operate at different timescales and NGOs ‘top down’ approach is reflected in how they structure and run their consultations:

‘When possible, we will always take on board concerns, and views and try to reach consensus, obviously. But we buy land to deliver our charitable objectives and that comes with obligations. Particularly, if it is a designated site, there are certain ways in which we will have to manage the land in order to get that into favourable conditions. With some things we can’t be so flexible, there are some actions that we have to take.’

Interviews show that some organisations operate according to 5-year management plans that outline their list of priorities and activities. After 5 years, the plans are revised and community is consulted on the new set of management plans: *‘We have always done that, it is just embedded in our practice, on that 5-year cycle we will consult people, let them know what is happening, what we are doing, when we buy a new reserve, we will have a consultation to let people know, what is happening, what we are doing.’* As these interviews indicate, people living on or near the reserves are *informed* rather than *engaged* and their input is not incorporated into the plans on a large scale. As one interviewee explained:

‘We get information from the communities that these organisations do not collaborate unless it is to deliver what they want to deliver. For them, collaboration at the local level means: ‘This is what we want to do’ instead of ‘How can we work together on this’. That makes collaboration difficult if not impossible’.

At the same time, however, a few of the organisations involved in this research recognised the need for improving communication with community groups and demonstrated a desire to improve their community engagement. As one interviewee explained: *'In fact, we are actually thinking at the moment, in terms of the Land Reform Act 2016, there is a Community Engagement piece in it. We already do a lot of Community engagement [...] But we are thinking now, do we need to make that more explicit, do we need to provide internal guidance on what are the best ways to do it'*. The primary interviews revealed that there is evidence of positive momentum from within the organisations to seek better methods of communication and engagement with local communities.

4.3 Limited possibilities for transfer of assets from NGOs to communities

The participants suggested that when people living on NGOs' estates purchase land, it is usually house sites for the purpose of receiving a mortgage and obtaining security. Portioning of grazing happens less frequently, however there are some exceptions. In Iona, crofting tenants requested for an opportunity to purchase their land from a land owning charitable trust. In Angus, there was an individual farming tenant who also accessed land from the NGO. According to the NGOs' records, large land purchase applications submitted by communities, however, are not commonplace.

Two NGOs expressed an opinion that some of their assets are classified as inalienable, which limits the opportunities for transfer to communities. Nevertheless, on some occasions, NGOs sell their land to their tenants. As the following quote indicates, transfer of assets from NGOs to communities happen infrequently and are technically limited by the legal status of charities' land.

'Normally we don't sell our land because we have an ability to hold land inalienable, whereas if you are a normal landowner and someone wants to build a bypass across it, there will be a compulsory purchase order. We, in theory, cannot be forced, we are not obliged, I don't think we are subject to compulsory purchase order. [...] The net result of that is that usually, if crofters have asked if they can purchase their land, we said yes, we probably could say no and make a fuss about it, but we don't normally'.

This is a perception expressed by research participants, which is technically legally incorrect. From a legal perspective, even charitable owners might be subjected to compulsory sale under certain conditions – e.g. under rare circumstances such as major public infrastructure projects. What is important here, however, is that both NGOs and their tenants *believe* that charitable organizations own land inalienably and have limited possibilities for relinquishing their assets.

4.4 Differences in land management and working practices

Overall, NGOs interviewed highlighted that Land Reform Act 2016 prioritises ownership over the type and style of management and that communities that come into land ownership struggle to access resources for improving land management. As one participant explained:

'We are concerned that the Land Reform was very focused on land ownership and not on how land was used and managed. We want a better link between these two things. Changing who owns the land doesn't necessarily influence how its managed unless you have a clear idea of what you want that difference to be'

The discussion about ownership vs. management of land was a prominent trope in many interviews with landowning NGOs. When asked about community land ownership on or around NGOs' estates, research participants expressed sceptical views, highlighting challenges community groups were likely to encounter, such as: lack of access to financial resources following the buyout, shortages of time, lack of land management knowledge, lack of coherence and sustainability within the community groups themselves, lack of clear vision for the newly acquired assets. The majority of the respondents identified the main problem in the disproportionate amount of funding available for the purchase of land as compared to the resources available for developing and managing the land:

'That is a general issue we are finding, there is money for communities to buy land but not necessarily to manage it. It is not that private ownership is always bad, it is objectives that are set for the land that are often bad and Land Reform is not addressing the need to shift people's thinking on objectives'

Community groups and large environmental NGOs also often struggle to work together due to incompatible working paces and capacity. This is illustrated well by the Arkaig Community Forest case study (see more on p. x).

In the interviews, both the community group and the Woodland Trust staff spoke about struggles to align their pace and working practices. From the perspective of the organisation, working with the community takes a lot of time because: *'We are not dealing with another professional group, we are dealing with volunteers who are doing this in their own time, they don't always act strategically, the decision-making process is not always very clear, they are groups of people who get together and talk about things but don't have a process in place to make decisions'*.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the community group, Woodland Trust is a big machine that they struggle to keep up with: *'They like to be seen to be doing lots, being productive, pushing projects, pushing every angle of the forest - environmental, trees, social aspects, so there is a lot of projects on the go all at one time and our capacity struggles to keep the same pace, especially when some of us are away. For us this is probably one of the most crucial challenges [...] we sometimes cannot keep up. We created an advisory board and that went really well, it helps us to stay involved and to push things forward'*.

As this example illustrates, creating an advisory board facilitated communication between these partners. Yet, this example highlights that working pace and capacity are major obstacles for community groups and NGOs who wish to work in partnership.

The difference in working practices is also evident in how much community groups rely on individuals' input and commitment. NGOs have resources to recruit and hire component candidates who ensure the continuity of their work. Community groups, on the other hand, often rely on exceptional individuals and their voluntary contribution. The community advocates interviewed for this project demonstrated outstanding commitment to their work, however it can be argued that reliance on a handful of individuals might be unsustainable in a long term.

4.5 Challenges for communities in urban areas

According to the stakeholders interviewed, community land ownership in urban areas faces many challenges. Community groups in urban areas are vulnerable to the same pressures that their rural counterparts, including lack of financial resources, lack of human resources, and lack of expertise in navigating the grants landscape. However, according to the Scottish Wildlife Trust staff working in urban areas, urban communities additionally have a lesser connection to the land than rural groups and less knowledge and hands on experience about how to manage land, what are the resources necessary, and what kind of commitment needs to be made.

'Crofters and farmers, they already have a connection with the land so they get it, but in urban communities, its very difficult, you get very few community woodland projects that are successful, people sometimes think the forest will take care of itself but it won't, you have to manage it'

Interviews with the engagement officers in Cumbernauld indicated that urban communities are aware of these challenges and there are not many urban communities participating in the Community Right to Buy scheme. There has been a recent case of an urban community acquiring a church for a community center in Portobello¹³ (Edinburgh), but there are no other instances of urban communities seeking to own larger plots of land for conservation or recreation.

Summary

- Interviews indicate that people living on or near the reserves are *informed* rather than *engaged* and their input is not incorporated into the management plans on a large scale.
- Both NGOs and their tenants believe that charitable organizations own land inalienably and have limited possibilities for relinquishing their assets.

¹³ <https://beta.gov.scot/news/urban-right-to-buy/>

- The majority of the respondents identified the main challenge for community ownership in the disproportionate amount of funding available for the purchase of land as compared to the resources available for developing and managing the land.
- Different working pace and capacity are major obstacles for community groups and NGOs who wish to work in partnership.
- Urban communities have a lesser connection to the land and knowledge about land management. In consequence, very few urban communities feel capable of taking on community land ownership.

5. Opportunities, alternative approaches and potential ways forward

This section examines the alternative approaches to communication and collaboration between community groups and environmental NGOs. The following paragraphs introduce existing opportunities and potential ways forward for community groups and NGOs that wish to work in partnership.

5.1 Improving two-way communication and prioritising active engagement

In the urban case study of Cumbernauld (see more on page 29), Scottish Wildlife Trust took a less conventional approach to how they communicated with the community. In their work with deprived communities, the engagement officers learnt that it is key to embed a reciprocal relationship between nature and the local community. Instead of asking people to support preconceived conservation projects, as is often the case in other community groups, their starting point became: ‘What can the environment do for *you*?’

Project leaders working in Cumbernauld are also local residents. They are embedded in the community which has helped them be aware of the needs and priorities of the people around them, which in turn has allowed them to make a valuable contribution to the program as they can utilise and exploit their local knowledge and personal connections. This has helped them to devise attractive and relevant modes of engagement. As a policy officer observed: ‘*One of the things we discovered in the Cumbernauld living landscape is that traditional methods of engaging with the communities don’t really work because it is quite a deprived community*’.

One of the local employees explained: ‘*In a more conventional setting the environmental sector would put on a walk and expect people to turn up and be interested in biodiversity*’. In Cumbernauld, instead of putting events such as a

biodiversity walk or butterfly camp, the team hosts a general community gathering in the environment in question, in this case the form of a community BBQ, and engage with people directly to learn about their skills and interests. From that approach, targeted interventions about open fire practices, improvement of paths to ensure people's safety, and activities with an emphasis on mental wellbeing emerged based on community feedback.

Building on that, they designed activities through which people can acquire new skills that can enhance their work opportunities. By establishing personal connections, attending local events, and building trust through numerous informal encounters, the staff members can set up programs which are designed to appeal to the local residents and allow them to experience the environment around them in a new way.

'We organise community bbq, bringing people together, [...], working with existing outreach groups, walking and talking with people not with the kind of ecological agenda to start with, it's all about spending the time and building trust relationships, some of these people will have probably quite chaotic lifestyles and they might find it quite difficult to engage, so it's about taking time to build trust, build their confidence and build their skills.'

The local engagement officers in Cumbernauld stated that they were committed to listening to the residents and to take onboard their concerns and observations. This approach is evident in one of their projects called Cumbernauld Green Routes. The project is looking to modify the centre of Cumbernauld and its links to surrounding communities by creating green routes which are accessible, safe and enjoyable.

In the feasibility study, locals were canvassed to assess opinions on how such a project should be developed. Through these consultations, it was established that fear of crime was a major concern preventing many from currently using the paths. This feedback was directly used to establish that the priority of paths be safe, clean, and visible:

'To make it safer, we improve the lighting, we improve the paths, we consider where people and traffic meet to make it safer, and it's just about giving people a voice, taking their concerns seriously and making them believe that they can affect change. And for that, they don't need a big degree, they don't need to give up that much time.'

For professional organisations, working in collaboration with the community on a local level can also function as a way of challenging engrained and automatic working practices and cultures. As a local manager of Woodland Trust shared:

'They [community members] might raise questions we would not think about because with my experience we do certain things automatically, sometimes they give me an opportunity to stop my

professional head from going - well I know what I am doing, and I will just do it, to yes, I should listen, what about this.'

The local team in Cumbernauld also works with the social housing providers. Social housing providers have properties and tenants on the edge of a many of the wild spaces in Cumbernauld. Cumbernauld Living Landscape works with the social housing provider find out what the opportunities and barriers are to engage with that green space and what can be done together to improve the access and safety for the people living in the area. As the policy officer commented: *'Being able to work with Sanctuary Homes is really important for us, because they can influence social housing development but also they have a particular target audience that we maybe don't know how to relate to [...] so its not just about ecology, it is very much a social project'*.

'We use volunteer trainings as an asset based community approach we tie into the strengths of the community and get in touch to understand it. These guys actually have tons of skills, tons of knowledge, especially about their own area, so why don't we work with that.'

An alternative approach to community consultation and engagement has been also shared by the Scottish Community Alliance. In Birnam and Dunkeld, which are engaged the contentious and complicated aspect of Transport Scotland's project to dual the A9, community members were invited to come up with a preferred road design that meets the needs of both the local community and Transport Scotland. The request for local people to submit their own ideas has had an overwhelming response, with 163 ideas being sent in from all parts of the community. The project is still in progress.

For the Woodland Trust, working with Arkaig Community Forest is their first collaborative ownership project. Due to the innovative nature of the project, the local staff often encounter new situations and challenges. They have to work with the community locally and also work back with the charity who are used to the situation where they own the land and they manage it how they see suitable. In order to facilitate two-way communication, senior staff and line managers were invited to come, see, and to understand the differences that come with collaborative ownership and management of the forest. As the local estate manager explained:

'I decided to support the community more and I invited the senior people to come in to see this and to understand that this is different. I have to explain to my direct line manager that we have to take them [the community], with us, there is no other way. There is still this mentality that this is our land and that we can do what we like with it.'

Linking local staff and the community groups with board of trustees and senior decision-makers is an important step in improving two-way communication and creating learning spaces for challenging the established perceptions and practices.

5.2 A networked rural development model: combining resources and strengths of community groups, NGOs and other stakeholders

Many of the research participants discussed the possible opportunities in collaborative partnerships with community groups interested in land ownership and management, highlighting that partnerships with NGOs can help community groups acquire funding and support. As a policy officer in one organisation observed:

‘Whatever the model for land management, it will require a range of different skills and sometimes the environmental NGOs are good at pulling those different partnerships together. We have fundraising and developments tools so it’s easier for us to put one of the funding packages on behalf of our partners’.

One interviewer shared an example of a community in Moffat, which initially refused an offer to buy land under the community right to buy scheme. However, after obtaining advice and resources from the Woodland Trust, they were encouraged and decided to proceed with the buyout. As the interviewee reflected: ‘It is sometimes about creating better, more favourable conditions for the community’.

Reflecting on the existing and potential partnerships between community groups and NGOs, we recommend a transition to the *networked rural development model*. In this approach, place-based strategies are led by local people but are acknowledged to involve external partners in a mutually beneficial partnership.

This approach draws not only on local assets and local knowledge but also makes use of external assets and knowledge to augment what is available locally. The networked development model recognises the necessary contribution of linking local communities with activists, researchers, and non-governmental organisation who can share relevant experience and skills.

In 2016, the Woodland Trust partnered with Arkaig Community Forest, a small group of local residents, to acquire a 2,500 acre site (see more on page 27). The partnership between Woodland Trust Scotland and Arkaig Community Forest has the dual aim of restoring the forest and stimulating sustainable economic activity around it.

For the Woodland Trust, joining with a community group who was able to exercise their right to buy, offered an opportunity to access valuable assets at a set value. This shows how in a successful networked rural development model, both local communities and NGOs can benefit from the collaboration. As an interview with the project leader indicates:

‘The driver for us was owning the forest and this was an opportunity to get involved in that off-market, there was a set value that we were happy with, and we were able to fundraise against that, so for us it was working with the community group to absolutely take

advantage of the government scheme [...] But at the same time, we saw the opportunity that working with the community was something new and interesting for the charity to move into [...]

As the project progressed, however, Arkaig Community Forest members, encountered another obstacle. They found it challenging to find time and resources to make use of their forest. As one interviewee explained: *'We do a lot on the meeting side, but in terms of actually getting people out there, many of us are working in the environmental sector anyway, they don't want to come back from work and do work again, and they want to be with their families over the weekend.'*

To address this challenge, the community and the Woodland Trust decided to implement a Woodlots initiative¹⁴. The Woodlot provides an opportunity for the landowner to get small areas of forestry into management and to generate a modest return. Local people from the area can apply and sign a management agreement. In return for their work, they can build a small hut, have a place to spend time with their family, cut trees for firewood etc. Woodlots scheme will help the community to maintain the forest, to engage a wider community, and to generate an income. It is an example of a networked model which brings together NGO, local community, neighbours and nearby residents as partners who contribute their resources, time, and expertise.

5.3 Balancing environmental preservation with sustainable consumption and economic activity

In the case of the Arkaig Community Forest (see more p.27), the aim is to both restore the forest *and* to stimulate sustainable economic activity around it. The forest is owned in partnership by the local community and the Woodland Trust, who both share a vision for a decades-long forest protection and restoration. At the same time, however, the leaders of the project hope that the local economy can benefit from wildlife tourism and that people can develop businesses by using products from the forest¹⁵. Arkaig is not an isolated case, and other community land owning groups in North Harris, Gigha, Knoydart and others demonstrate that environmental protection and sustainable livelihoods can go hand in hand.

Key to delivering this model is extensive dialogue and a willingness to compromise on both sides. For example, the community group and the Woodland Trust both want sustainable livelihoods for the people living around the forest. However, for the Arkaig Community Forest that is the number one priority whereas for the Trust restoration of the forest is the first objective. To successfully work together, the two parties have to compromise and agree on management plans which work towards both forest restoration and economic development.

To illustrate the extent of the collaboration between the parties involved, the participants shared a story about a planned road development. Woodland Trust did

¹⁴ <https://www.scottishwoodlotassociation.co.uk/>

¹⁵ <http://www.arkaigforest.org/>

a feasibility study and suggested to extend the road to the other side of the forest. Their main motivation was to make the forest more accessible and to make transportation of timber more viable:

'Although generally we object to development in native woodlands, we thought we could mitigate, the benefits of having the road would outweigh potential damage. But people did not want it. They did not want a road, they did not like the environmental and landscape impact of a road, they didn't think an environmental charity should be doing this. We disagreed but we had to listen to them as partners'.

To make this approach a success, it is key to work towards creating a context in which conservation objectives and community's needs can be seen as co-dependent rather than opposing.

Following the purchase of the forest, the Arkaig Community Forest established a cooperative through which members and non-members can be hired by the Woodland Trust to perform various maintenance tasks. This arrangement creates jobs and delivers skills training to the local community. It is hoped that in the future the local economy can benefit from wildlife tourism and establish businesses using the products from the forest. The aim is to see Arkaig Forest established as a benchmark for the joint regeneration of both its native forest and local community.

People involved and benefiting from this arrangement come from as far as Loch Arbor and Fort William, which shows the ripple effects that community ownership can have. Moreover, Woodland Trust is planning apprenticeship opportunities, where young people could join and get experience in different elements of forestry: machine driving, conservation, education. The programme will be people-centred and it will aim to showcase the opportunities that forestry can bring to them.

It is a common NGO attitude to work alone and not in partnership, people are so difficult to work with, community groups are a nightmare and I agree with that. But that's the point - NGOs that work with communities manage to create projects that are sustainable and last beyond their activities, beyond the big and shiny 5-year project cycle.

As the success of the fundraising campaign for Arkaig Community Forest highlighted¹⁶, members and funders of the Woodland Trust were supportive of the idea of collaborative ownership focused on both environmental restoration and sustainable development. It proved that when thought-through and well-communicated, campaigns to raise awareness about the benefits of directly working with communities on conservation projects can be immensely successful.

¹⁶ Over £4.5million was raised to support this collaborative ownership project: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2016/12/arkaig-announcement/>

The PR value of the collaborative ownership goes beyond the initial campaign, as there is an on-going interest in this partnership, which attracts researchers and academics from various institutions. Further research might focus on devising a social economic study to identify the benefits of this type of land management for other communities beyond the catchment area.

5.4. Addressing high private land concentration

Interviews with people involved in the Arkaig Community Forest highlight that most of the land in their area is owned by the Achnacarry estate. The Community Right to Buy created a unique opportunity to access land, which is usually unavailable to people living in that area: *'All the surrounding land here, 70 000 acres, is owned by the Achnacarry Estate, clan of Cameron, so thats as traditional as you can get, and then you have the little people here in houses on the fringe of it.'*

In this context, access to a large portion of the woodlands has both economic and symbolic significance, as in the past the Arkaig forest belonged to the Cameron clan. The Community Right to Buy scheme allows for beginning to address the private land concentration issues and the isolation of the communities from the land. Asked about their motivation to exercise the Community Right to Buy, a community member explained:

'Here we don't have access to the land, we just don't, we are totally cut off, we are unable to access it for commercial gain, even just for a living, it's all owned by the estate and they don't sell, not up here, they don't sell any.'

At the time of research (July 2018), the ACF community group was preparing to purchase another small forest from the Forestry Commission, which is located close to the main road and a hiking trail. The land will be more accessible to the community and will offer more direct opportunities for renting out buildings for offices (for the Woodland Trust), housing for the community members or a café for visitors. Although this is still in the planning phase, the community's willingness to expand and to take on ownership of another asset demonstrates the empowering effect of this collaborative approach.

Summary

- Key in successful engagement projects are local staff who build on their connections in devising locally specific and relevant engagement methods.
- Part of innovative engagement methods is working with diverse and less conventional stakeholders.
- To improve collaboration between community groups and environmental NGOs, it is key to work towards creating a context in which conservation objectives and community's needs can be seen as co-dependent rather than opposing
- When place-based strategies are led by local people but are acknowledged to involve external partners, mutually beneficial partnerships can develop.
- The Community Right to Buy scheme allows for beginning to address private land concentration issues and the isolation of the communities from the land.
- Partnerships with NGOs provide resources to communities that wish to own land and can lead to empowering communities to take ownership of other assets.

Conclusions

Challenges for NGOs and community groups

There can sometimes be a conflict of priorities between NGO's mission and community needs. In some instances, NGOs prioritise the expectations of their funders and members over local concerns.

Inadequate communication between stakeholders, often in the form of a 'top down' approach, can cause poor relations and create cross-purposes. For example, consultations are often conducted in a passive rather than active way, where communities are informed about management plans rather than engaged. The reasons behind it are multiple: NGOs struggle to define who the community is, communities do not have a clear vision for their place, there is no time or resources to conduct active engagement, and NGOs fear that communities will not agree with their plans.

However, there was still the perception that while NGOs' staff working on the ground are seen as engaged and approachable local communities still often felt that executives and boards of trustees, who make the decisions about the reserves they live on, remained distant and unapproachable.

NGOs interviewed believe that they hold land inalienably and therefore there are limited opportunities for transfer of assets from charitable bodies to communities and individuals. Although from a legal perspective transfer of assets from charitable organisations is possible under certain conditions, the perception of both communities and NGOs is that NGOs have inalienable rights to land.

NGOs expressed sceptical perceptions of community land ownership. They argue that change of land ownership can affect land management negatively as a result of communities having limited resources and their priorities are less well defined. Following land acquisition, communities struggle to access funds for management, which is a real challenge expressed by community stakeholders as well.

Opportunities and ways forward

Evidence from the case studies showed that effective communication is key to overcoming differing priorities and finding common purpose from which mutually beneficial compromises can be established and effective collaboration can be grown. The existing examples of co-creative partnerships and engagements that take community groups and local people's needs and concerns as a starting point, as a 'bottom up' approach, offered alternative approaches to community consultation and can serve as a blueprint for other organisations

In the case of Arkaig Forest case, wider public contributed generously to support this project and the NGO, The Woodland Trust, saw local collaboration as valuable. This proves that with adequate planning, communication, and compromise conservation objectives can be presented inter-dependent rather than opposing to community needs. This, of course, does not mean there are always aligned, and continuous dialogue remains an important part of partnerships.

Arkaig Community Forest was also a model of collaborative ownership, which despite many challenges, offered opportunities for both the NGO sector and the local community. For NGOs, it offered access to assets at a set price, an on-going PR value, and opportunities for bottom-up learning. For the communities, it created a chance to own land in areas of high private land concentration, it created job and training opportunities, and it empowered the community.

The case of Cumbernauld showed that there are important, untapped benefits of conservation work in urban areas. The case offered lessons in how engaging deprived communities in environmental projects can be made beneficial to all. The project also served as an example of the benefits of when staff, NGOs and community group members, are embedded in the community and how this helps them be more aware of the concerns and challenges for a project, and how this can be key in initiating collaborative partnerships and shaping successful projects.

Recommendations

A networked approach, whereby local assets and local knowledge is augmented by external assets and resources, is likely to be the most effective way to bridge the gap in resources and expertise when land is transferred to community groups.

Creating place-based plans and developing community projects, that are created by and for the local community, are more likely to encourage sustained community buy in and engagement with the project, helping to ensure long-term viability.

NGOs should engage in '**bottom up**' **communication** as opposed to 'top down'. Efforts should be made to *engage* the community as opposed to *informing* them of plans. This is particularly relevant in the context of designing public consultations.

NGO senior staff should make efforts to visit the sites, meet with community groups and to understand local dynamics. This will help to bridge the gap between local and senior staff, and address engrained working patterns and practices that hinder collaboration with community groups.

Scottish Land Commission is currently finalising a Code of Practice. Therefore, there is a momentum to formalise and systematise community engagement from both within and beyond. Once the engagement guideline is published, it will be important to put mechanisms in place to hold organisations accountable to the new requirements.

Glossary of terms

ACF – Arkaig Community Forest

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

NTS – National Trust for Scotland

RSPB – Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

SLC – Scottish Land Commission

Appendix 1.

Case study 1. Arkaig Community Forest (rural)

Establishing a collaborative ownership partnership

When in 2015 the Forest Enterprise Scotland under the National Forest Land Scheme gave the community in Loch Arkaig first refusal right to buy the woodlands, the community seized the opportunity. In the local community, there was a group of proactive and engaged members, who were passionate about community land ownership and sustainable development. Living in an area with high land concentration and shortages of land for community needs and development, the group identified this as a unique opportunity to own land.

At the same time, however, they recognised the huge logistical challenges that managing over 1000 hectares of woodlands presented to a small community. As one of the core members of the group explained: *'We realised we could not do this on our own with our capacity, its a small community of 50 and then a subgroup of 15, so we looked to bring someone in who could facilitate it and had the money and the expertise'*.

Hence, the core members of the community group decided to approach different organisations with an aim to establish a collaborative partnership. Woodland Trust expressed interest to join and the project gathered momentum. The Loch Arkaig pinewoods are one of only 38 Caledonian Pinewood Inventory sites in Scotland and therefore opportunity to purchase the forest at a set price was extremely attractive for the Trust.

The two organisations came together and devised a memorandum of understanding to decide how they were going to work together. Signing the memorandum also secured an extension to the disposal and gave them time for fundraising. Woodland Trust ran a fundraising campaign, which turned out to be their most successful campaign to date: over 4,5 mln pounds were raised over a short period of time. The partnership with the community played an important role in the success of the campaign.

Today, the community owns land in two different parts of the forest, which are both favourable and with great potential for eco-tourism activities, educational trips, and other attractive business options. Under this agreement, Woodland Trust has 95% of the forest under legal ownership and ACF has 5%. However, the two parties signed a management lease agreement of the whole forest and agreed to manage it in collaboration. This means that whatever major decision the Woodland Trust wants to make about the forest, they need to consult with the community, and vice versa. An additional advisory board was created that oversees the partnership and the management decisions.

~ It is definitely difficult at times but it is well worth it, for the opportunities that are there. As I said, this is Scottish struggles, but it is worth it, I would say it is working here.~

Appendix 2.

Case study 2. Cumbernauld Living Landscape (urban)

Context

In 1994, Scottish Wildlife Trust was gifted 280 hectares of land in Cumbernauld by the North Lanarkshire Council. Today, they own and manage 4 big reserves. The Living Landscape initiative was conceived in 2009 and it took off in 2013. The partnership project is led by the Scottish Wildlife Trust, North Lanarkshire Council, Forestry Commission Scotland and The Conservation Volunteers, supported by community partners across the town. From the beginning, the initiative was focus on people, communities, and engagement. The goal of the project is to work with people across the town to connect them to nature and make sure everyone can benefit from the town's woodlands, parks and wetlands. The Cumbernauld Living Landscape's long-term vision is for a green network in the town, providing clean air, water and recreation for the residents.

People-focused community engagement

Over 50% of Cumbernauld's town centre is made up of green spaces: parks, woodlands and gardens. However, these areas are often disconnected from one another and many are not as good for people – or wildlife – as they should be. Aware of these circumstances, the community officers working under the Living Landscape initiative are committed to engage people from various backgrounds and neighbourhoods.

As a community engagement officer with extensive experience observed: 'Teaching people how to take care of nature is not enough to sustain interest. On the other hand, creating spaces and facilitating activities through which people can experience the direct benefits of the environment, proves to be more successful'. She explained how understanding and embedding a reciprocal relationship between nature and communities is a more successful way of creating sustainable community engagements. Therefore, she argues that instead of asking people what can they do for the environment, environmental organisations should shift their focus and show people what the environment can do for them.

Fostering a relationship between people and nature

The aim of Living Landscape's engagement work is to embed in the community habits through which people can experience the benefits of nature. By doing that, the engagement officers hope to foster a reciprocal relationship, where people appreciate the benefits of nature and in turn take the initiative to care for it. Examples of benefits that caring for the environment can deliver for the communities include:

- *safety*
- *recreation*
- *stress alleviation*
- *benefits for health and wellbeing*
- *skills development*
- *air and water purification*

Living Landscape' programmes are designed to raise awareness and create experiences around these benefits.



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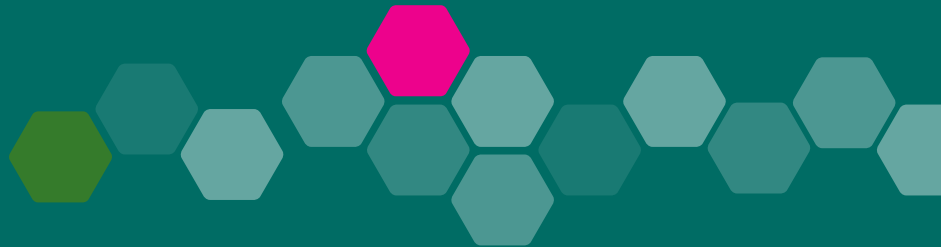
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