

The Terrible Truth About The Terrain – A Review of “The Lie of the Land” by Guy Shrubsole

Is there anything much more fundamental than the land we and countless other creatures live on and from? Isn't it vital that those privileged to own it are legally accountable to society for how they treat it? And yet, isn't land ownership and land use in England also shrouded in obfuscation and misunderstanding?

Some of the key questions raised by Guy Shrubsole's latest myth-busting book came to mind, as I looked on in despair at the ongoing environmental vandalism by the local landed estate. It's been a year-long saga of tree felling, vegetation removal and burning on the slopes of a once habitat-rich hill. All this ecological erasure is conducted in the name of archaeological heritage, part-funded by Historic England and the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. As Chris Packham would say “You couldn't make it up, and you don't have to”.

Read it And Weep

One reviewer suggested, *The Lie of the Land* “...should be compulsory reading in schools...” I agree. It is the full package- a factually rich, well- referenced critique of past practices and the status quo, a policy recommendation manual and a call to intelligent reaction, all wrapped up in Guy's ability to write sentences that are simultaneously searing and entirely reasonable. Within this book is the truth about the terrain of Britain, especially England. The countryside is not the fair and benign place so many of us believe. It is a place where the environmentalist's adage that “the Polluter Pays” is too often turned on its head: we, the public, fund private polluters, often very wealthy ones.

Each chapter offers many revelations – beyond the dangerous maths that 50% of England is owned by 1% of the population, he details centuries of profound and enduring damage by the “custodians of the countryside”, be they corporations & businesspeople, the Duchies and other landed aristocracy, the Church, farmers, MOD etc. Between them all and over time, no species has been left to natural processes, no ecosystem remains intact. From the enclosures, to the draining of the fens, to the burning of moorland, to the “hobby” introductions of invasive species, to the wildlife-killing hobbies of the gratingly not good, it becomes evident that too many landowners are primarily custodians of their own interests. Supporting this conclusion is Guy's description of the very long history of political rejection of any serious attempt at land-use- or land-ownership reform or of including farming and forestry activities in the planning system (apart from to a limited degree in National Parks).

Soiling the Nation?

Whilst paying detailed tribute to brave and principled nature friendly and regenerative farmers, Guy urges us not to be distracted– there isn't nearly enough of them and those who try can face hostility from regressive, powerful landowners and their advocates, such as the National Farmers Union and the Country Landowners Association. As Guy said in a recent talk to the Royal Geographical Society “we must pay more attention to those doing harm”.

In effect, the majority of landowners are enabled to commit ongoing damage to nature, ecosystems and community connections with the natural world, either by accident or design. In the most stable of Holocene times this would be deeply unpleasant but in an era of climate and ecological breakdown it is suicidally unacceptable.

Peppered with killer facts, it is hard to choose which ones to highlight. There is a telling statistic, which demonstrates that even areas legislated to be most protective of nature/wildlife - the SSSI's - are not safe in private hands. "Less than half of English SSSI are in favourable condition and many others are declining". Just 16% of SSSI's contained within land owned by water companies are in good condition, although perhaps the negligence of that particular landowning sector is not such a surprise.

Stewarding the Stewards

The heart of Guy's position is that the self-proclaimed stewards of the land must be transparently accountable in law for what they are doing to it, accompanied by a 5-year plan of improvements. He proposes an Ecological Domesday Survey - all those with 1000 acres or more must produce regular reports of their stewardship accompanied by a digitised map, a baseline ecological survey and a plan e.g. to meet international nature goals such as the highly promoted 30% of land protected for nature by 2030. At present, the UK is only 3% of the way there. A logical conclusion of this obligation could be, that if landowners don't comply, the land can be compulsorily purchased in the national interest.

Complementing this should be a raft of new laws and data collection, with shifts in powers and oversight by institutions. Guy advocates for a national land-use strategy which would also necessitate full transparency about all land ownership. He believes we need to take back control of vital carbon sinks like grouse moors before it's too late, with legislation to ban moor burning and driven shooting. And why not enact a Community Right to Buy law, just as exists in Scotland, allowing communities first refusal to buy available land, supported by a fund to aid purchase? National Parks have to work very hard to persuade private landowners (who own the vast majority of their territories) to be more nature-friendly so why not take more land into public hands via a Public Nature Estate, as so many other countries do, like the USA, Japan & Germany? To make this work he says, a bolstered Natural England must be free from political control by DEFRA.

'Twas Ever Thus?

The blocks to all this are obvious and have so far prevailed. Hence a call to action for all of us. If we CPRE members, nature-lovers, activists, scientists and politicians really want democracy to work in favour of the majority of people, responsible farmers and the rest of nature, we must become more vigilant in raising questions about what we see going on in the fields, forests and rivers around us. This means joining campaigns like Wild Card or Operation Noah and lobbying our political representatives for any of Guy's suggested policies. It could mean supporting community-based funds for land buyouts. We would also do well to lose any squeamishness about challenging landowners' negative practices, and to reject the long-encouraged belief that it isn't really any of our business. Yes, it really, really is.

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