Amended written submission from Rewilding Britain

Rewilding Britain welcomes the opportunity to give its views on the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill to the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee.

We are a charity, launched in 2015, dedicated to the mass restoration of ecosystems in Britain. We believe that through rewilding we can start to reverse centuries of ecological damage. We can re-establish natural processes, reconnect with nature and regain wonder for the natural world. At the same time this can help provide more sustainable livelihoods for rural communities and landholders, as well as creating significant social benefits for urban dwellers.

We welcome land reform in Scotland as an opportunity to address damaging land management practices, and provide incentives for reestablishment of natural ecosystems.

Our position on the Bill reflects our desire to stop the decline in nature on a large scale, and to make Scotland a better place for people and wildlife in the future.

Part 1 Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement

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We support the Scottish Government’s ambition to have a land rights and responsibilities statement. This should be a clear set of principles guiding management of land in Scotland.

A country’s wealth begins with its land. Scotland has been heavily managed over centuries for timber, wildlife, livestock farming, grazing, agriculture and sporting pursuits such as deer stalking and grouse shooting. Whilst there are many well run estates and farms, this exploitation has caused serious damage to large areas of our natural ecosystems, particularly in the uplands where forests and wildlife should be flourishing.

It’s important to make decisions today that will get us to a better point in the future.

Part 2 The Scottish Land Commission

We would welcome the establishment of a commission to oversee policy. This should be transparent, impartial and free from vested interests.

Part 3 Information about Control of Land etc

It is sensible for any democratic country to know who owns its key asset: its land. We support proposals for increased transparency around the ownership of land. This include corporate entities. There is no reason why charities and individuals owning land can be identified but not those owning a part of our country through a corporation.
Part 4 Engaging Communities in Decisions relating to Land

We welcome the proposal to have clear guidance on how communities should be consulted regarding land use changes. It’s important to engage people in decisions that will affect them, especially if they are living on the land.

There should be clarity as to the level of engagement required, and what defines a community. With regards the large-scale restoration of ecosystems, the community may be the entire population of Scotland and not simply the people living on or close to the areas being affected.

Part 5 Right to buy land to further Sustainable Development

All development should be sustainable. But what does sustainable mean? It should mean that decisions taken today will not adversely affect people tomorrow. We are living with the consequences of unsustainable development over centuries: overgrazing by sheep and deer, deforestation, peatland drainage and sporting management practices have caused widespread degradation of native habitat and wildlife, exacerbated greenhouse gas emissions and downstream flooding, and compromised water quality.

We welcome the principle of having a means to intervene in the land market for the purposes of community buyouts that involve sustainable development. This is especially true if, as we believe it should be, sustainable development can be taken to mean the development of impoverished land into a living, fully functioning, flourishing ecosystem. Equally we would like to see this accompanied by improved incentives for implementation of such sustainable development, and removal of incentives that undermine this.

Part 6 Entry in valuation roll of shooting and deer forests

We agree that the business rate exemption for shooting and deer forests should be ended.

Part 8 Deer Management

We welcome these proposals. We believe that better deer management is essential to bring about the desperately needed restoration of ecosystems in Scotland. Wild deer are a key part of the ecosystem in Scotland but excessive numbers are overgrazing and preventing the regeneration of woodlands and native habitat generally.

High deer numbers are not in the public interest. Those who encourage high numbers are usually doing so for their own private interest. We welcome proposals aimed at establishing the population of deer at a number the land can naturally support.

We believe changes in deer management are required urgently and should be implemented as soon as possible.