

Petitioner submission of 21 October 2022

PE1966/C: Formally recognise and incorporate local knowledge in Scottish Government policy

Underpinning the rationale for Petition PE1966 is the anger and mistrust felt when decisions are taken that ignore local knowledge contributions and always default to the scientific method. In their recent white paper addressing Red List assessments, the IUCN advise indigenous and local knowledge, (ILK) has an equal value to other knowledge systems ¹. Within the academic terrain, the consequences of ignoring local knowledge are wide-reaching; a power imbalance results, positive outcomes for biodiversity are compromised, inequity in the decision-making process is created, the lack of recognition and injustice results in harm and ill health ^{1,2,3,4,5}. These consequences are familiar to the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA).

The Understanding Predation Project demonstrated the benefits of collaborative working; however, it also revealed a power imbalance, it created harm to individuals and negative outcomes for red-listed wader species.

On the recommendation of NatureScot, Strathbraan community applied for a licence to control ravens as previous findings indicated predation was contributing to wader decline. The licence was granted, however it was opposed by powerful NGOs who filed for Judicial Review. NatureScot then requested their own Scientific Advisory Committee to effectively review and mark its own work and they found fault in the trial design. Consequently, NatureScot advised the community to withdraw the raven licence which avoided NatureScot having to contest a judicial review. Despite the promise by NatureScot of a revised application the following year, no licence was forthcoming. During this time, the community were subjected to months of online abuse and still ravens continue to predate rare wading birds in a locally important area, these consequences resulting from lack of egalitarianism in the conservation sector.

NatureScot relies on Government funding. The board and leadership structure reflect academic, business and conservation interests with few individuals in key positions experienced in day-to-day land or water management. As such, they are distanced both physically and conceptually from local practitioners and their expertise.

A dominant power structure exists with NatureScot and leading conservation NGOs who benefit from funding. These organisations can claim superiority and exert control; their dominance in the conservation arena contributes to inequity where it is easy to reject the contribution of local knowledge which is considered inferior. The same observation can be applied to key leaders within National Parks.

There are many examples where groups of individuals hand-picked by Government to review a certain subject have minimal experience of the subject matter.

One example, which the SGA wrote to the then Environment Minister, Roseanna Cunningham, about, was the composition of the Deer Working Group panel. No one on the selected panel was an experienced deer manager. This struck the SGA as a peculiar omission.

Despite this omission, the Scottish Government has said it will carry forward virtually all recommendations of the Deer Working Group report. Such decisions, in our view, increase the marginalisation of rural workers.

In 2019, the SGA invited all MSPs to see a professional fox control foot pack in operation in Highland Perthshire. This was relevant to the key subject of Hunting with Dogs, which is now going through the Parliamentary process as the Hunting with Dogs (Scotland) Bill.

Such visits and demonstrations are very important to those whose knowledge is obtained and expressed not through academic language but through practical working experience. They provide opportunity to decision makers to witness activities about which they will be making decisions upon.

One MSP turned up for the foot pack visit, Murdo Fraser MSP.

In contrast, rural workers are expected to respond to time-consuming consultations which are themselves a discriminating process. The language adopted, frequently loaded with technical 'policy speak' reveals a lack of consideration or awareness of different conceptions of knowledge and interpretation. Subsequently this reveals bias and serves to block alternative narratives. Accessibility issues connected to remoteness such as poor broadband which limits access to this type of engagement, increases marginalisation.

The rural workforce, experts in their own right, are often ignored in favour of the observations of citizen science. Citizen science is

embraced by many within the conservation elite in Scotland. Many bird populations trends for example are collated by 'observers' from organisations. The results will influence policy and the allocation of conservation funds.

In contrast, rural practitioners often find important decisions such as wildlife management licensing applications refused because their evidence is not considered sufficiently robust, despite providing photographic evidence and their own species counts. This inequity is tangible and results in poor outcomes for individuals and biodiversity.

The SGA reiterate that in the interests of social justice, local knowledge be formally recognised and incorporated within Scottish Government policy.

*'... if we are serious about the commitment for conservation to be equitable, engaging with issues of recognition is a necessary step to take'*³

Reference:

- 1.IUCN. 2022. Application of Indigenous & Local Knowledge (ILK) in IUCN Red List assessments: White paper. Version 1. Adopted by the IUCN SSC Red List Committee and IUCN CEESP-SSC Sustainable Use & Livelihoods Specialist Group Steering Committee. Downloadable from: <https://www.iucnredlist.org/resources/ilk>.
- 2.Kogan M. (2007) Modes of Knowledge and Patterns of Power. In: Sörlin S., Vessuri H. (eds) Knowledge Society vs. Knowledge Economy. Issues in Higher Education. Palgrave Macmillan, New York
- 3.Martin, Adrian & Coolsaet, Brendan & Corbera, Esteve & Dawson, Neil & Fraser, James & Lehmann, Ina & Rodríguez, Iokiñe. (2016). Justice and Conservation: the need to incorporate recognition. Biological Conservation. 197. 254-261. 10.1016/j.biocon.2016.03.021.
- 4.Vessuri H. (2007) The Hybridization of Knowledge: Science and Local Knowledge in Support of Sustainable Development. In: Sörlin S., Vessuri H. (eds) Knowledge Society vs. Knowledge Economy. Issues in Higher Education. Palgrave Macmillan, New York
- 5.Wheeler, Helen & Root-Bernstein, Meredith. (2020). Informing decision-making with Indigenous and local knowledge and science. Journal of Applied Ecology. 10.1111/1365-2664.13734.

