




The People's Plan For The Uplands

Information for policymakers on
looking after moorland areas and the
communities that depend on them

PHOTO BY RмбаILEYMEDIA



REGIONAL
MOORLAND GROUPS

regionalmoorlandgroups.com



Photos by RMBaileyMedia

Executive Summary

Britain is home to 75% of Europe’s remaining heather moorlands. These stunning landscapes are rarer than the rainforests and shelter many of our country’s most endangered bird species, such as curlew, golden plover, and lapwing.

Much of the UK’s moorland is centred around the northern English uplands, which include areas such as the Peak District, Forest of Bowland, and North York Moors. These are unique landscapes that have been looked after and maintained by generations of people living and working on the moors.

In turn, England’s uplands support vibrant rural communities that depend on the moorland for employment, tourist revenue, and recreation, as well as a sense of identity and general wellbeing.

Now, however, these communities feel under threat. Our study reveals deep anxieties amongst the people who live and work in the English uplands. Speaking to moorland managers, gamekeepers, farmers, conservationists, and hospitality workers, we discovered a profound concern for the future of these landscapes and the people who rely on them.

The people of the uplands care deeply about the nature around them. More than 60% of participants in our study said what they value most about the uplands is its biodiversity, with a further 19% prioritising beautiful scenery and access to nature. At the same time, 22% are most concerned about the loss of natural habitats in the uplands, 13% are concerned about the threat to biodiversity, and 12% worry about the increasing risk of wildfires.

Upland communities are crucial in maintaining traditional skills which preserve the countryside.

Table of Contents

- Executive summary** 3
- Methodology** 6
- Why people care about the uplands** 7
- What concerns people about the uplands** 10
- Recommendations for policymakers** 13
- About the Regional Moorland Groups** 18

Even more pressingly, however, the people of the uplands are worried that their very way of life is under threat. When asked ‘what concerns you most about the UK uplands’, 41% said a ‘decline in traditional ways of living’. Examining this in greater detail, it transpired that most people in the uplands connect these traditional ways of living to the preservation of the moors themselves. They worry that restrictions on traditional land management practices and field sports will have a detrimental effect on the local environment, as well as threaten jobs, businesses, and the sense of community that the uplands has fostered until now.

97% of participants said that politicians ‘do not do enough’ to look after the countryside or rural communities.





Photo by RMBaileyMedia

Gamekeepers provide much needed manpower and expertise for tackling wildfires on moors, at no cost to the taxpayer

People in the uplands are seriously unimpressed with attempts by politicians, government agencies and charitable organisations to intervene in the maintenance of English moorlands. 97% of those surveyed said that politicians ‘do not do enough’ to look after the countryside or rural communities. Participants regularly complained about upland communities not being ‘listened to’ and accused organisations such as the RSPB and Natural England of following popular fads rather than the science. 75% said rewilding was ‘not a good thing on the whole’ for the uplands.

In creating a ‘People’s Plan for the Uplands’ participants were emphatic about the central role played by field sports and private shooting estates in sustaining the relationship between the uplands and the communities that look after them.

Participants regard these estates – in particular the gamekeepers and moorland managers they employ – as the primary custodians of the uplands. They are highly vocal in their support for traditional moorland management techniques, such as cool heather burning and predator control, in order to conserve the beauty and biodiversity of the English uplands.

Additionally, participants identified field sports as one of the primary economic and social engines of the uplands, providing not only direct employment but also supporting businesses across the conservation, tourism, agriculture, and commercial sectors. Field sports are viewed as a vital part of the uplands’ heritage and a cultural touchpoint for many of the communities in these areas.

The importance of field sports to the ecological, economic, and social sustainability of the uplands is well-known to those who work on these landscapes. Moors managed by gamekeepers have far healthier populations of ground nesting birds, with species such as curlew and lapwing being up to 3.5 times more likely to raise a chick to fledging than on moors not managed for shooting. Over the course of the 10-year Langholm Moor Demonstration Project in Scotland, the involvement of gamekeepers led to a 10% rise in curlew numbers, 16% more golden plover, and 21% more snipe.

Shooting in general is worth £3.3 billion to the UK economy each year and every week £1 million of mostly private investment is spent managing moors for red grouse, resulting in a knock-on benefit of £12 million a year for rural businesses. Grouse shooting specifically is estimated to directly create 1,500 FTE jobs and supports many more throughout its supply chain.

Additionally, moors managed for grouse shooting have a profoundly positive impact on the climate. The peat on UK moorlands locks up more carbon than the combined forests of Britain and France, holding 42% of our country’s entire carbon stock. 44 million tonnes of this stock is embedded on grouse moors.

To boost this carbon capture, over 30,000 ha of peatland restoration work has been completed on grouse moors in recent years, achieving more than a quarter of the government’s 2025 peatland restoration target. Grouse moors are regularly subjected to a process of cool burning in which old, desiccated heather (but crucially not peat) is burned off to promote new growth for birds nest in. This process significantly reduces the risk of wildfires on moorland, which, aside from destroying plants and animals, release dangerous amounts of greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere.

£1 MILLION A WEEK
Is spent in mostly private investment to look after and maintain moors for red grouse.

The People’s Plan for the Uplands, therefore, suggests the following recommendations to policymakers:

- 1 Involve local people in decisions about the future of the uplands.**
Trust in their expertise and acknowledge the deep connection which they have to the moorlands.
- 2 Promote the benefits of traditional moorland management practices.**
Recognise that the uplands are unique landscapes that can only be sustained through time-tested techniques and should not be experimented on.
- 3 Support private estates in looking after the uplands.**
Appreciate their work as rural custodians and acknowledge the unique way in which field sports align the economic and social interests of upland communities with the ecological sustainability of the moors themselves. Avoid measures that disrupt this delicate balance.

With the support of government, local authorities, charities and conservation groups, together we can create a sustainable future for English moorlands and ensure that upland communities are listened to and allowed to thrive.

The Regional Moorland Groups (RMG), 2024.

Photo by RMBaileyMedia





Photo by RMBaileyMedia

Why People Care About The Uplands

“[The uplands] are a great place to live with nature on our doorstep. That enables us to pass on traditions to the next generation.” – **Helen, nurse, 55-64, County Durham.**

People care about the uplands for a huge variety of reasons, however by far the most popular reason for survey participants is the biodiversity these unique landscapes support. This is hardly surprising: the UK’s uplands support many rare bird species such as curlew, lapwing, and golden plover.

After this, the second most valued aspect of the uplands is the space they provide for sports and exercise. Relatedly, 30% of respondents said they had used the uplands for field sports in the last year and 23% for activities such as walking, running, or rambling.

Methodology

The People’s Plan for the Uplands is based on a public online survey conducted between April and July 2023.

Participants were invited to answer a combination of mandatory multiple-choice questions and freeform short questions, as well as responding to optional long-form opinion prompts.

Participants hail from across the English uplands and reflect a broad spectrum of backgrounds and professions, from gamekeepers, and farmers, to conservationists, scientific researchers, hospitality staff, police and healthcare workers.

What unites them all is a deep sense of affinity and connection to the uplands, either through work, recreation, or from a more broad sense of regional identity and pride. In all 196 people took part: nearly double the 103 assembly members of the RSPB and WWF’s ‘People’s Plan for Nature’, published in 2023

Red and amber listed ground nesting birds thrive in and adjacent to heather moorlands

Photo by RMBaileyMedia

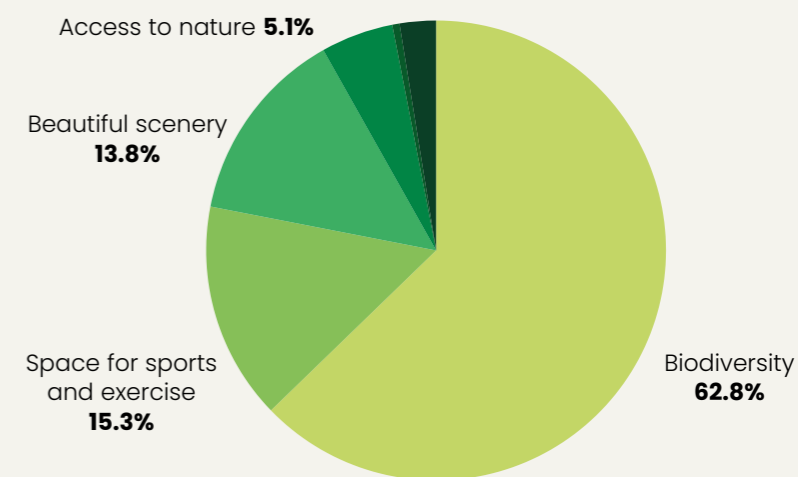


The survey data was primarily collected at agricultural shows, including the Royal Lancashire Show, Northumberland Show, and Great Yorkshire Show. Here RMG volunteers asked members of the public if they would like to offer their opinion to policymakers about how the uplands should be preserved for future generations. Answers were recorded via an online app.

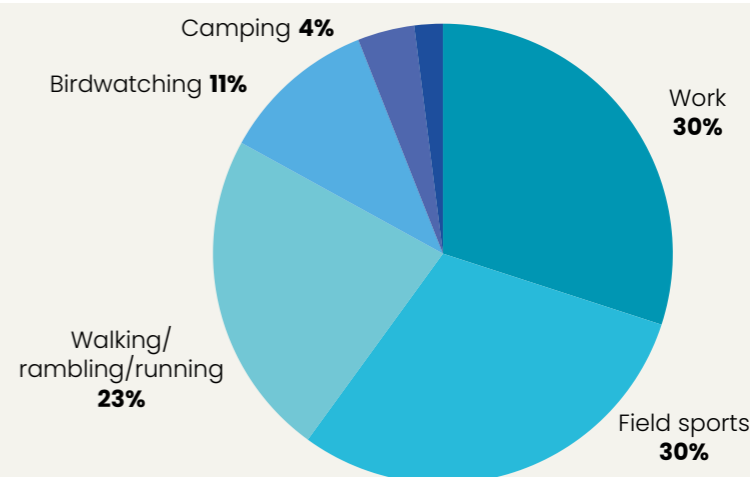
A link to the survey was also hosted on the Regional Moorland Groups website and was distributed via the RMGs’ newsletter. Respondents were incentivised by the chance to enter a random monthly prize draw, with the prize being a £100 voucher to a countryside clothing retailer.

All statistics in this report represent the full sample size, unless otherwise stated. Some long-form answers have been edited for length, clarity and spelling.

What do you value most about the uplands?



What have you used the uplands for in the past year?





Children attend a 'Let's Learn Moor' class hosted by the Calderdale Moorland Group.

"[the uplands] provide the opportunity to work and generate income for my family and allow us to get out and enjoy a more traditional way of life and enrichment in fresh air" – **Amanda, 35-44, Greater Manchester.**

Another major consideration for why people care about the uplands is work. Just under a third of survey respondents said they had used the areas for work in the last year. These included farmers and gamekeepers, as well as land agents, conservationists and foresters. Many participants explained that it wasn't just about employment but that their jobs provided a lifestyle and sense of identity that they couldn't imagine their lives without.

"It provides us with a job that supports my family, as well as my own passion for working in the area and protecting the red listed species that are there." – **Edward, gamekeeper, 24-34, Derbyshire.**

When asked "in what ways do the uplands improve life for you and your family", over a third of those who answered referenced their job. After that, a quarter mentioned the uplands being a good place to raise a family, 14% talked about nature and the beautiful scenery, 9% said it benefitted their health and wellbeing, and just under 5% talked about a sense of community.

"It brings back the sense of community which is lost in modern society," – **Ellie, self-employed, 25-34, Greater Manchester.**

One aspect of the uplands that touches on all these factors, however, is field sports. About 15% of participants mentioned shooting or field sports in their answers but more often than not related this back to other themes such as family, employment, biodiversity, and a sense of community.

"Using the uplands for field sports provides me with access to a community with a shared interest and forms a major part of my social wellbeing." – **Luke, teacher, 25-34, West Yorkshire.**

The integral role of field sports in promoting biodiversity, as well as economic growth and a sense of cohesion is well-known to those who live in and research the uplands. A 2023 report by Dr Simon Denny ('Is driven grouse shooting sustainable?') concluded that moorland managed for grouse shooting provides greater environmental, social, and economic benefits than any alternative use.

"They allow me to get out and enjoy myself and keep fit with hunting and shooting, which allows us to pump money into the local economy," – **Jack, student, 18-24, West Yorkshire.**

"compared with upland areas where grouse shooting does not take place, the biodiversity of 'grouse moors' seems to be at least as rich, if not richer," Denny observed.

Participants frequently connected the natural beauty of the uplands to the way in which land is managed for field sports. They also recognised the vital role which these sports play in the local economy and in bringing together people of different ages and backgrounds. In many instances, survey respondents referenced the natural beauty of the uplands and the role played by field sports as part of an overall sense of identity.

"The uplands are good for my mental health. I get exercise through birdwatching and field sports, which I feel give everyone who uses it great pleasure" – **Beth, 18-24, North Yorkshire.**

"[The uplands] enable us to get out shooting and stalking so we can help species flourish and maintain a healthy balance for nature" – **Richard, 35-55, West Yorkshire.**

Many participants connect their appreciation for the beauty of the uplands to the way in which they are managed for field sports.



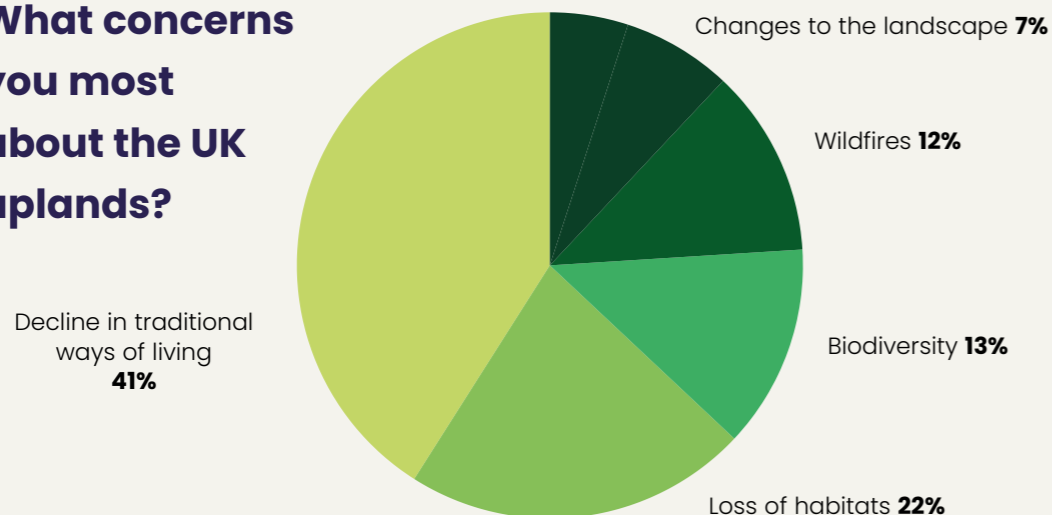
What Concerns People About The Uplands

“Someone who hasn’t been on a moor should not be making decisions that impact them. So much is at stake for so many people. Don’t bow down to a minority who seek to destroy what has happened for centuries.” – **Thomas, acoustic consultant, 25–34, Greater Manchester.**

The uplands are a delicate ecosystem that support not only many species of rare plants and animals but also small, tight-knit communities that are inextricably linked to the landscapes around them. As such, the people who depend on these landscapes have a long list of concerns and anxieties. Chief among these is the fear that the traditional way of life in the uplands is under threat, which could in turn threaten the beauty and biodiversity of the surrounding countryside.

“I love the amount of wildlife that depend on these moors for nesting season. I love how they bring so many people together on shoots days and benefit so many local communities.” – **Emily, media manager, 25–34, County Durham.**

What concerns you most about the UK uplands?



For many living in the uplands, concerns about a ‘decline in traditional ways of living’ has a lot to do with how the uplands themselves are looked after. Traditionally heather moorlands are managed for game shooting, which not only creates jobs for gamekeepers and estate managers but also supports a range of other businesses from butchers and country supply shops to independent hotels and restaurants.

Ultimately, this allows more working-age people to stay in the uplands and bring up their families there, rather than moving to the nearest big town or city. The presence of young families and small businesses in the uplands is integral to the area’s sense of community and traditional living – in opposition to an increasingly urbanised and homogenous modern world.

This connection is borne out by the quantitative data. When asked “is game shooting is important to the rural economy of the uplands?”, 99% of respondents said yes.

“ [I would miss] the sense of community and friendship that field sports carried out in the uplands creates.” – **Martin, 35–44, Lancashire,**

In a similar vein, survey respondents frequently connected their concerns about biodiversity, habitat loss and wildfires to the role played by moorland managed for game shooting. 99% answered ‘yes’ to the question “Do you think game shooting supports biodiversity in the uplands and helps to preserve the region’s iconic heather landscapes?”

This makes sense from an ecological perspective. Moorland that is managed for shooting – particularly grouse shooting – is regularly subjected to a process called ‘cool burning’, in which longer patches of heather are burned in a controlled manner to promote new growth. This creates an ideal habitat and food source for many rare species of ground-nesting birds.

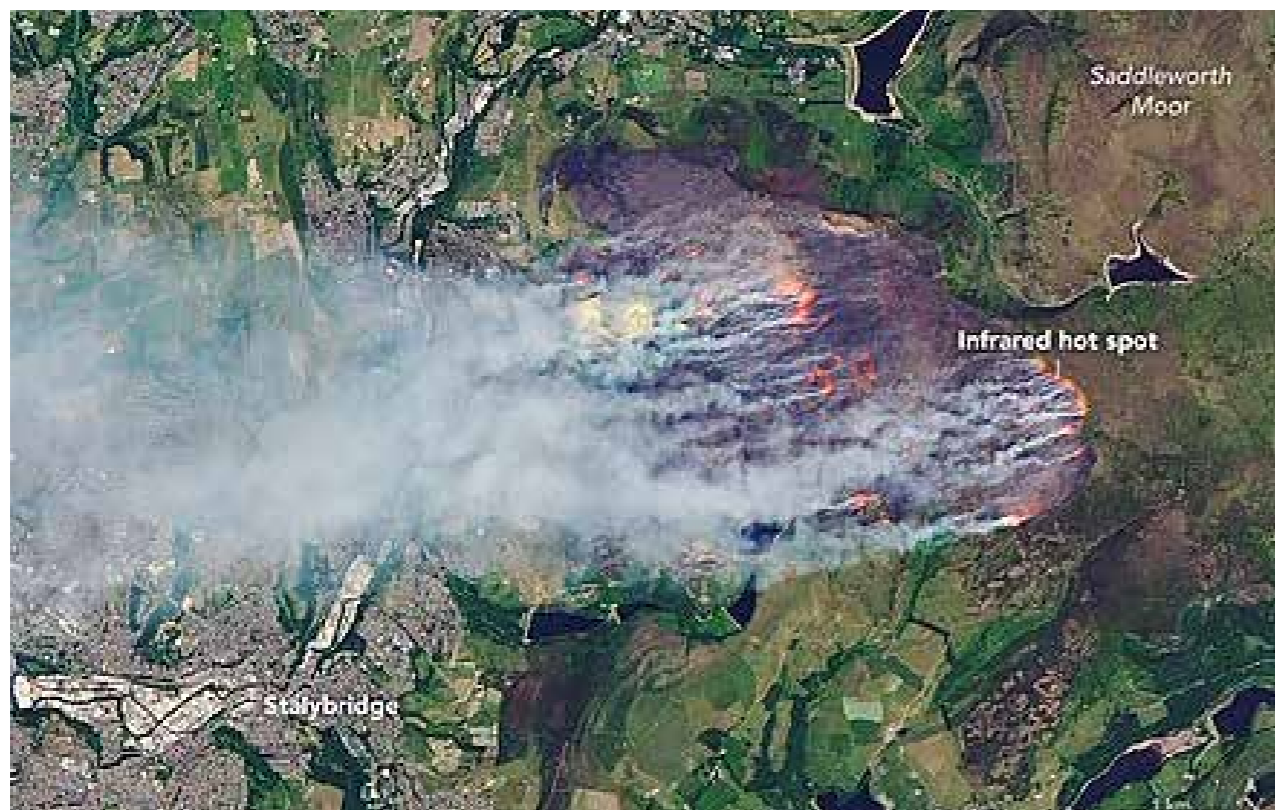
The cool burning process also reduces the risk of wildfires as older, drier heather is burned away in a controlled manner, reducing fuel loads for potential wildfires.

It is no accident that two of the most damaging moorland wildfires in recent history, Saddleworth Moor in 2018 and Marsden Moor in 2019, took place on unmanaged moorland.

As well as being disastrous for wildlife, these fires have a hugely detrimental impact on public health. Research at the University of Leeds found that the Saddleworth fire was associated with approximately five million people being exposed to dangerous PM2.5 particulate matter.

“The heather is far too long to offer access to nest, nutrient and insect value to ground nesting birds. Many areas can not be cut by machine as inaccessible. The increased fire load means wildfires cannot be stopped on old burns, which leads to a greater destruction of fauna and wildlife. Large wildfires no doubt cause more pollution when burning for days/weeks then controlled winter burning.” – **Glynn, retired, 65+, West Yorkshire.**

Against this threatening backdrop, many in the uplands are concerned that policy decisions are actively making the situation worse. When asked “is rewilding a good thing on the whole for the UK uplands?”, 75% of respondents said ‘no’.



Annotated view of the Saddleworth Moor fire on 27 June, taken by NASA's Landsat 8 satellite.

Increasing government subsidies and media praise for rewilding projects is deeply concerning for people in the uplands, who essentially view the process as allowing these delicate landscapes to collapse.

“Rewilding concerns me. Randomly planting trees in the most inappropriate places, over wetting the moors to cause land slides and dangerous bogs.” – **William, Company director, 45-54, West Yorkshire.**

Many of those who live in the uplands blame the vogue for rewilding and non-traditional methods of moorland management on organisations such as the RSPB and Natural England. In March 2022, Dove Stone Reservoir near Oldham, which is managed by the RSPB, suffered a devastating wildfire that destroyed more than two-and-a-half football pitches of heather moorland. Nevertheless, the RSPB remains opposed to cool burning and treats its moorland with rewetting, which is proven to be less effective at preventing wildfires.

“I think it is of concern to note that areas managed by Natural England and the RSPB have experienced a far greater decline in numbers of ground nesting birds than moors managed for shooting. Although some of the decline in these species is down to farming practices it is concerning that organisations which purport to protect and champion these birds are in fact unable to do so.” – **David, 45-54, West Yorkshire**

“The RSPB don't seem to understand what happens in nature as well as they should.” – **Peter, retired farm manager, 65+, Greater Manchester.**

Recommendations for Policy Makers

“Stop interfering, put people in charge who actually know what they are talking about, listen to the people who work and live on the hills, keep traditional skills alive” – **Ellen, farmer, 25-34, Derbyshire.**

At present, people who live and work in the uplands or have strong ties to these areas have very little faith in politicians to represent their interests. 97% of survey respondents think politicians don't do enough to look after the countryside or rural communities.

To a large degree this stems from the belief that politicians are not paying attention to people in the uplands. When asked “what would you like to see the government do differently in the uplands?”, 20% of those who answered said they wanted to be listened to more.

“Listen to those that work in and amongst it, not those that think they know better” – **Alice, farm secretary, 25-34.**

“Listen to us and our knowledge, let us manage the land” – **Hannah, gardener, 35-44, West Yorkshire.**

In a similar vein, 15% of those who answered wanted to see more autonomy for upland communities and less interference from government altogether. Running through this was a sense that policymakers appoint people with little practical knowledge of the uplands to administrate these unique landscapes.

Meanwhile, a substantial number felt that government is not following the advice of scientists or experts when it comes to managing moorlands and is instead kowtowing to popular consensus on matters such as rewilding or managing moorland for game shooting.

“Invest more in supporting traditional land management practices to retain these cultural landscapes and retain working rural communities” – **Phillip, research scientist 45-54, Durham.**

Do you think politicians do enough to look after rural communities?

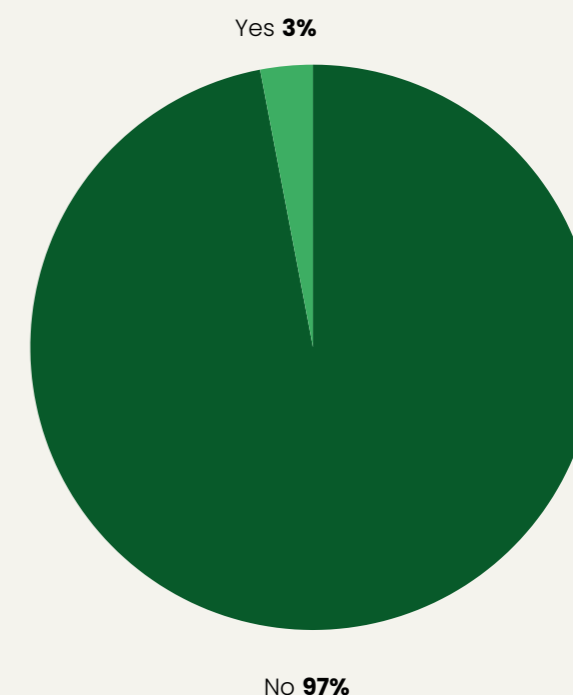




Photo by Jo Pearson

Gamekeepers from the Calderdale area gathering for a gun salute to commemorate the death of Queen Elizabeth II (2022).

“Look at and listen to science based research and enact its findings” – **Steve, conservationist, 65+, West Yorkshire.**

“Stop making decisions based on emotion and politics! Make decisions based on fact and science.” – **Robert, retired, 55-64, West Yorkshire.**

“Remove Natural England, create local land management groups from farming and rural workers’ pool of knowledge” – **Kevin, gamekeeper 55-64, West Yorkshire.**

Additionally, some people in the uplands feel that the problem with government’s approach stems from a lack of public education about these landscapes, which can lead to wrongheaded conclusions about traditional land management practices.

“Educate the public about how much the land benefits from traditional ways. And, stop ‘fads’ being allowed to take over the news and brainwash society” – **Ellie, self-employed, 25-34, Greater Manchester.**

“Put in more effort to educate the general public about what goes on in the uplands and that it is a working landscape, with lots of important wildlife, and not just a playground for visitors” – **George, 25-34, Durham:**

When prompted to think about ways in which the uplands can be better looked after, respondents were overwhelming in their support for greater use of traditional moorland management practices.

Asked: “Imagine its 2050 and the UK uplands are thriving, what is being done differently for these landscapes to flourish?”, 42% mentioned some kind of traditional methods of moorland management, with 6% mentioning controlled burning specifically.

“Following traditional time proven management methods is important to sustain the biodiversity and conservation of rare species that thrive on grouse shooting managed moorlands.” – **Austin, company director, 55-64, Lancashire.**

“Allowing burning to reduce and manage the risk of wildfires (becoming more important)” – **Marnie, land agent, 18-24, Cumbria.**

Once again, many in the uplands connect traditional ways of living and the preservation of moorland landscapes and biodiversity to field sports. In a follow-up question, survey participants were asked “Do you think game shooting has a place in the UK uplands? Why? Why Not?” all but one of the 155 who replied said yes.

Of these responses, 18% mentioned how shooting creates jobs and supports the rural economy through the spending of shooting estates and their guests. This is perhaps unsurprising when the Countryside Alliance estimates that grouse shooting contributes £100 million to the UK economy and provides more than 2,500 full-time jobs.

About 13% spoke about how field sports generate a sense of community in the uplands and sustain a way of life. However, 58% said that field sports are vital for conservation in the uplands: boosting biodiversity and maintaining the beauty of the landscapes.

“I have seen moorland managed for shooting and non managed moorland. I do not shoot, there is far more wildlife on the managed properties by far. Management is essential” – **Steve, conservationist, 65+, West Yorkshire.**

Respondents frequently highlighted the work of gamekeepers in controlling predator numbers and managing heather for the benefit of rare animal species. They also talked about how shooting estates were making up for a gap in funding from either government or the charitable sector to look after and sustain the uplands.

I think shooting is one of the most valuable assets to the uplands. Gamekeepers and their support network ensure the heather is in good condition, ensure there are firebreaks, ensure they are on top of predator control. All as part of their job. The government nor charity are ever going to fund an efficient course of action to ensure all of the above are done correctly. – **Joe, 35-44, West Yorkshire.**

Smoke rises over Marsden Moor, which is managed by the National Trust without the use of cool burning (May 2024).





58% of participants said that shooting has a place in the uplands because of its role in conservation including protecting rare bird species like the lapwing (pictured).

There is evidently a firm belief in the uplands that the interests of the people who live there are best served through traditional land management practices. Field sports are seen as a great way to support these practices, as well as bring jobs and investment to areas of the country that often feel overlooked by government.

“Yes, [shooting] significantly supports local rural economy from hospitality for guns to everyday outdoor country clothing for staff working on shoots. Employment for local people including Farming families. Gamekeepers manage pests and heather moorland to benefit wildlife, which in turn helps with tourism. – Keeley, manager, 35–44, Durham

Ultimately, upland communities see private estates as vital to the management and preservation of heather moorland, as well as crucial to bringing much needed jobs and investment to these often overlooked areas.

When asked, “What do you think the role of private landowners should be in looking after the uplands?” just under a third mentioned jobs and or investment of some kind. Meanwhile 60% talked about the responsibility of private estates towards land management and conservation.

“Private landowners are vital for investment in maintaining the uplands. The level of investment in some cases is huge and could not be matched by public money.” – Matthew, company director, 45–54, Greater Manchester.

“[landowners should be] Keeping tradition alive and ensuring good practices of upkeep for the environment for diverse habitats to thrive” – George, estate agent, 25–34, North Yorkshire.

While much is rightly made of estates’ support for the rural economy, upland communities more closely associate them with stewardship of the moors and appear to trust them to a higher degree than government agencies or charities.

Upland communities’ recommendations to policymakers is threefold, therefore. Firstly, to listen more to the people who live and work on these landscapes. Trust their judgement and expertise and don’t buckle in to the pressure of public opinion which is frequently misinformed or misguided.

Secondly, to not squander the benefits delivered by hundreds of years of traditional moorland management practices. These time-tested techniques

have preserved the extraordinary beauty of England’s heather moorlands for generations and support an extraordinary diversity of rare bird and mammal species. Policymakers would be wise to incorporate heather burning and traditional predator control into their conservation strategies, rather than supporting untested and ultimately ineffective methods of conservation like rewilding or moorland rewetting.

Finally, policymakers would be well advised to support the work of private estate owners in looking after the English uplands. Upland communities are overwhelmingly positive about the benefits that these landowners bring, not just in terms of employment and local investment, but also their stewardship of the moors through a combination of traditional management techniques and careful attention to scientific research.

Upland communities see shooting as a crucial element of the relationship between private estates, local communities, and the moorlands themselves. It effectively lines up the economic, conservational, and social priorities of all three groups and helps to deliver the most sustainable long-term outcomes.

“Following traditional time proven management methods is important to sustain the biodiversity and conservation of rare species that thrive on grouse shooting managed moorlands” – Austin, company director, 55–64, Lancashire.

Photo by RMBaileyMedia





About The Regional Moorland Groups

The Regional Moorland Groups provide a single voice to coordinate knowledge and share learning across local communities in the English uplands. We work with land managers, moorland owners, environmental NGOs, parliamentarians and farming bodies.

Our fundamental principle is that the historic system of managing the uplands for livestock and game is valued both as a cultural heritage in itself and as the primary delivery mechanism for a range of other public benefits: the protection of landscapes and habitats valued by society.

We empower and enable isolated rural communities, running marginal micro-businesses, to deliver environmental benefits as part of their sustainable livelihoods.

To this end, we stand for:

- The active management of land for game makes a significant contribution to rural economies and the maintenance of local communities.
- The active management of moorland provides substantial public benefits by managing land to enhance its landscape, biodiversity, access, heritage and other environmental goods.
- Gamekeeping and associated moorland management are fundamental components of our historic and on-going culture.

Our Aims

The Regional Moorland Groups aim to provide a window into our beautiful moorlands. We do this by working to:

- Encourage more diverse communities to enjoy nature and connect with the moorlands closest to them.
- Help people understand the links between game management, biodiversity, carbon capture, and sustainable moorland.
- Share knowledge about moorland management that has been passed down through the generations, including skills that protect historic sites and enhance habitats for wildlife.
- Equip participating organisations so they can better secure this heritage over the long-term.

Our Members



Calderdale Moorland Group



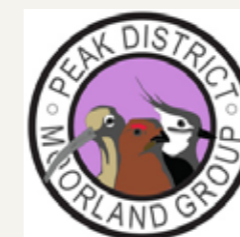
Forest of Bowland Moorland Group



Northern Pennines Moorland Group



Nidderdale Moorland Group



Peak District Moorland Group



North Yorkshire Moors Moorland Organisation



Yorkshire Dales Moorland Group



REGIONAL
MOORLAND GROUPS

Photo by Jo Pearson