Words Mark Hillsdon

Photographs Courtesy United Utilities

Despite their rugged appearance, there's a delicate environmental balancing act being played out across the nation's moors and fells. For years farmers and conservationists have argued over the need to preserve the heath and blanket bog, to limit grazing and to protect the land for wildlife and recreation.

Now, a small farm nestled in a picturesque fold of the Lancashire hills is showcasing a new model for managing upland farms that offers to restore the balance between farming and nature.

Even before the new model is proven, however, there are fears that recent changes to the type of subsidies farmers receive may have gone too far, with potentially disastrous results.

Over the last fifty years, huge swathes of moorland have been artificially drained, with gullies, known locally as grips, dug out in a push to make marginal land more productive and suitable for grazing.

At first this was down to a post-war need to feed hungry mouths, a need that manifested itself in other areas of the UK with the grubbing-up of hedges and the merging of fields into vast, featureless tracts. But gradually the subsidy, not the need to put food on the table, became the incentive.

Under that legislative leviathan, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), farmers were encouraged to get as much produce from their land as possible. Livestock farmers were given a subsidy based on each animal, so from a financial if not an environmental point of view, it made sense to keep increasing the size of their flock or herd. But often the land couldn't cope, and over-grazing was the inevitable outcome.

One result of this was a damaging loss of habits for wildlife, especially birds. Another was that the hills gradually became less effective in their role as a vast natural sponge, soaking up the rain that lashes the fells before releasing it into rivers and reservoirs.

Neil Johnson is a farming and countryside advisor for the National Trust and meets regularly with farmers across the Northwest. Around 60 per cent of the charity's land is classed as upland, so it's little surprise that he's concerned about the plight of hill farming and the continued ability of the National Trust to manage its land.

"Traditionally over-grazing has been encouraged by economic pressures and by headage subsidies," explains Johnson. "As margins became tighter, the way to get more money was to keep more sheep, and that meant more grazing."

Historically the number of sheep a farm could carry was determined by the number of sheep it could support through winter. Then came quad bikes and four-wheel drive tractors, which meant farmers could get winter feed up to the moors. "The fell went from supporting the sheep to becoming just an area of ground where the sheep were kept," says Johnson.

Managing the land for shooting, which can require intensive and frequent burning, put further strains on a once robust ecosystem that was by now struggling to provide the mosaic of habitats needed to maintain the moors' rich biodiversity.

At the same time, the drainage grips were drying out the peat and heavy grazing was killing the sphagnum moss that acted as a sponge for the rain. The land began to wash away, no longer able to cope with the brown, discoloured torrents of water.

[CONTINUED OVER]

NEW MODEL FARMING

Farmers The search for a new way of farming a precious landscape Conservationists

RIGGINDALE

TOURING WHITENDALE FARM

BLOCKING DRAINAGE 'GRIPS'

"If the bog becomes degraded and dries out, then the peat starts oxidising," explains Peter Wilson, the RSPB's project manager for Bowland in Lancashire. "Then when it rains the water flushes out all the organic carbon, turning the water brown... (so) there's an obvious correlation between good vegetation quality and water quality."

And it was this that first alerted the region's water company, United Utilities (UU), to the fact it had a problem on its upland estates. The company had taken over responsibility for the land when the industry was privatised in the 1990s. Much of it is still occupied by tenant farmers.

"We can never do without treatment works – they keep the water safe to drink – but by managing our land as best we can, we avoid adding more and more levels of treatment," says UU's sustainable catchment manager, Martin McGrath.

Last year UU launched the Sustainable Catchment Management Programme (SCaMP), a highly innovative scheme that brings together a raft of ideas for improving the upland environment into a single workable package.

The five-year pilot project covers more than 20,000 hectares of estates in Bowland and the Peak District. Farm plans for each of the 22 tenant farms have been worked up by staff from the RSPB and UU, with advice from bodies such as Lancashire Rural Futures, funding from agri-environment schemes and backing from the water industry regulator, Ofwat. Key to the scheme's success will be whether or not it manages to provide a viable and secure income for UU's tenant farmers whilst simultaneously helping wildlife and improving water quality.

The place where that question will first be answered is Whitendale Farm in Lancashire, the farm that is currently at the heart of the SCaMP project. On the hills above the farm the drainage grips have already been blocked and the blanket bog is returning. Efforts to repair areas of eroded and exposed peat, heather moorland and hay meadows are underway. Cash has also been found to repair and improve farm buildings for indoor wintering of livestock and lambing, and new waste management facilities are reducing run-off pollution into nearby watercourses.

SCaMP will also help some tenants to benefit from the high revenue income available under agri-environment schemes. For instance, at Whitendale SCaMP has paid for a new 84 hectare oak woodland that will help to reduce erosion on a plot of marginal land, create new habitats for wildlife and provide the farmer with an annual Forestry Commission grant for 15 years.

> As it stands at the moment you can't profit from entering an agri-environment scheme, so why bother?"

But this is only part of the picture. There are so many changes taking place in the type of subsidies available, that even the most hardened hill farmer could be forced to give up the unequal struggle of eking a living from the degraded land. And when agriculture goes into retreat, nature steps in.

Reforms to CAP mean that support payments for farmers are no longer related to agricultural production. This new Single Farm Payment was initially welcomed by many conservationists as the death knell for a system that, by encouraging over-grazing, had caused so much environmental damage in the first place.

As Johnson says: "There is very much a trend away from agriculture based on production support, which in general is something that the National Trust and others broadly support, but it's also about recognising that there are some inherently important landscapes which are important because of agricultural management."

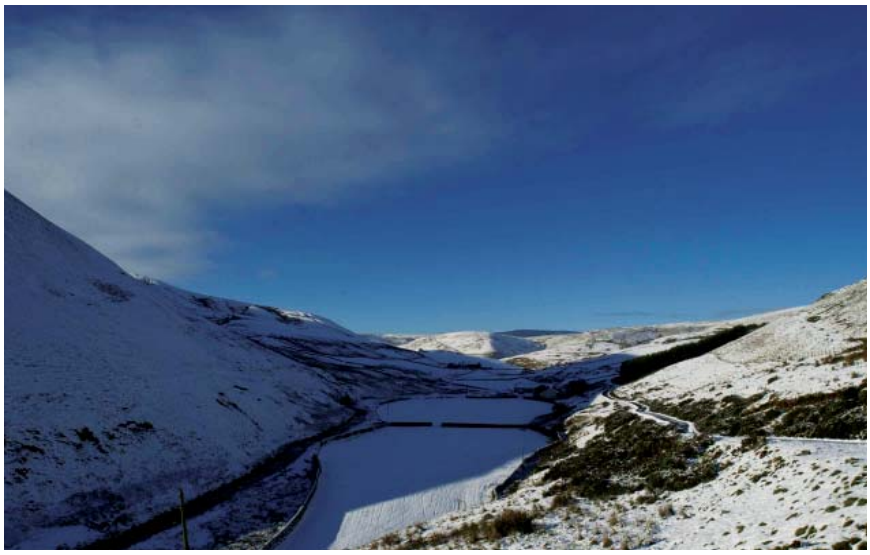
He fears that the fact the EU has stopped paying farmers based on the number of animals they keep has taken away the incentive to keep livestock at all, with potentially devastating effects on the landscape.

"Agriculture has done some damage to upland environments but the overriding benefits of the uplands still exist, and they exist because of agricultural management," says Johnson.

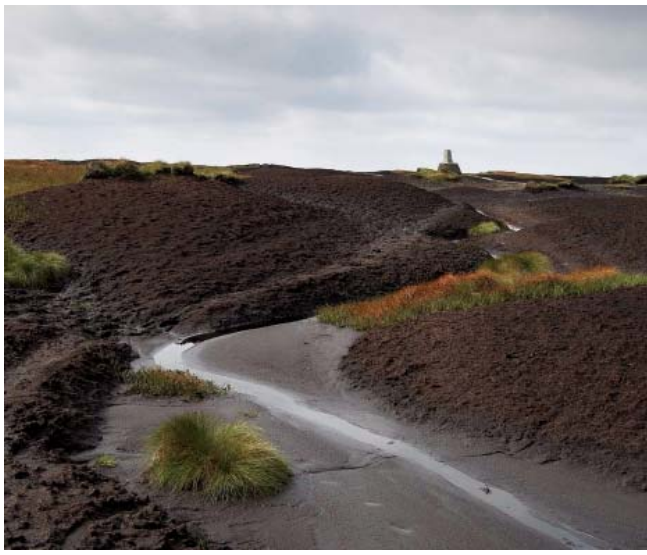
"Ultimately if you remove grazing livestock altogether then you are going to lose the habitats that we are trying to preserve," says Wilson. "The land would become wooded."

Margaret O'Kane, an environmental advisor at Lancashire Rural Futures, agrees. "The bigger picture is that lots of these upland habitats require grazing and livestock as a management tool to keep them looking as they currently do, or indeed to restore them back to the types of habitats we'd like to see. They are managed, grazed, farmed landscape."

Last year the Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) was brought in to replace the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. The scheme's entry level (ELS) is open to all, and awards are based on achieving



BRENNAND VALLEY



EROSION ON BLACK HILL

30 points per hectare of land. The points are based on implementing basic environmental standards, in return for £30 per hectare for five years. A second higher level (HLS) is awarded on a competitive basis but only applies to land perceived to have benefits to high priority species and habitats.

But Johnson is again sceptical about how the scheme will help many farmers, because it is paid on an 'income foregone' basis. This means that a farmer who reduces his flock from 100 to 60 to lessen the effects of over-grazing will only receive a subsidy for the 40 sheep he's lost.

"As it stands at the moment you can't profit from entering an agri-environment scheme, you just get compensation for a loss of production. So why bother?" asks Johnson.

And all this at a time when the Hill Farmers Allowance, an important income stream that recognised the difficult economic climate in the uplands, has been axed in favour of a new programme, the Upland Reward Scheme, which Johnson says is likely to receive much less funding.

Lancashire Rural Futures is trying to help farmers make some sense of all the paperwork. "What we try and do is make farmers aware of the wildlife habitat they have and explain the best way to preserve and enhance it," explains O'Kane, although she concedes that agri-environment schemes don't suit everyone.

"The new ESS doesn't always offset the amount of subsidy that farmers used to receive," she says.

However, John Alpe is one farmer who has made agri-environment schemes pay. With the price crash on meat in the late 1990s, Alpe recalls: "We decided to change direction completely and use the environment as an income stream."

First of all he turned his 200 hectare farm over to organic production and reduced his stock numbers drastically, before taking over a second 200 hectares which he put into stewardship.

Alpe, who had always appreciated the benefits of conservation, investigated what subsidies and grants were available and realised that he: "could make it stack up."

He was able to draw on money from an organic conversion scheme, as well as woodland and heather regeneration programmes. He then became involved in Forward Farming and monitoring changes to the land, and from that he was able to introduce farm walks and educational visits.

"It's no use being a zealot," he says, arguing that farms run in this way must still be done so on a commercial footing. "It [the environmental subsidy] only lasts so long and then you'll just haemorrhage to death."

Alpe is adamant that this kind of diversification is the way forward. "It depends on how entrepreneurial you are," he says. "It is going to be very difficult for small farms in the future. They have got to get involved in environmental schemes to bulk the cash up."

O'Kane agrees. Many of the farmers she works with have diversified into areas such as farm shops, bed and breakfast, and even catteries. "In the old days being a progressive farmer meant working out how to get the highest amount of production per hectare, whereas now it means looking at what's available and making the best use of it. It's still about pounds per hectare but not necessarily product per hectare."

For years hill farming has been propped up and subsidised, the odd crust tossed at it in order to keep it going, largely so that difficult decisions about people's futures and livelihoods could be put off for another day. But now things are coming to a head. The whole subsidy system has changed, and so, potentially, has the hill farmers' role.

"These farm businesses aren't viable in any long term way. We need a scheme that recognises that and the importance of these habitats for nature conservation and water quality," says Johnson. "But it comes at a price. So there needs to be a system in place that actually provides financial incentives for landscape management."

And perhaps therein lies the future for Lancashire's hill farmers. Water is a precious commodity these days, its collection and storage crucial. In Lancashire there is a vast, natural landscape that soaks up, stores and finally releases this liquid asset. And who is better placed than the hill farmers to take over the role of custodians?

MORE INFORMATION:
www.unitedutilities.com/?OBH=3227&SCH=scamp&ID=0

Mark Hillsdon is a Manchester based freelance journalist specialising in the environment and regeneration.