

Moorland Matters, and Game Conservancy's Crucial Role

*GCUSA Advisor, former GWCT Chairman,
and recent author explains.*

As many of you know the Trustees of Game Conservancy USA extended a kind invitation to speak at December's auction at the University Club, that I was happy to accept. In the run up to the event, the resourceful Robyn Hatch had a suggestion: as I was preparing my remarks, could I preserve the text so that he could circulate it to members and friends who could not attend the reception? A good idea, sensible and labour saving that I happily agreed to with the caveat that I might, once on my feet, go a little off script. What I didn't tell Robyn, is that I don't write much down before I speak, just headings and notes. So what follows is emphatically not what I said in my brief address at the University Club, though it covers the issues I talked about . . . but omits any scurrilous references to persons living or dead, ducks, and Nigel Farage.

I can never begin a letter to GCUSA without expressing enormous gratitude for everything that you have done for GWCT. This gratitude is felt by everyone who understands the vital necessity of keeping GWCT in business and the role GCUSA plays in doing so. The current Chairman of GWCT, Sir James Paice, the Trustees, past and present, and the Vice-Presidents, would all concur.

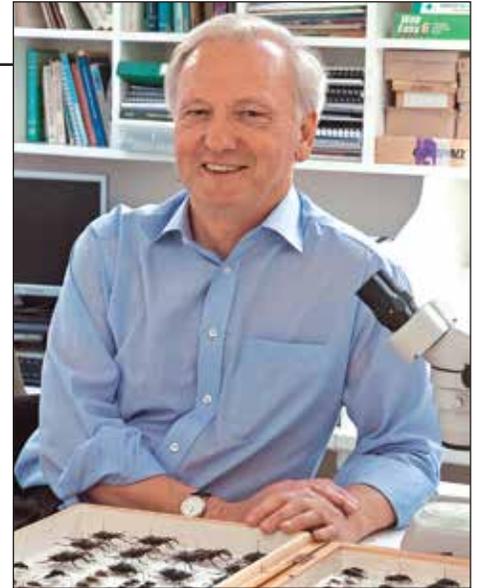
This sense of gratitude is even greater when we are faced with a year like the last. The combined effects of the prolonged covid pandemic and the worst grouse season for decades played havoc with GWCT's ability to assemble the shooting lots which traditionally form the centre piece of the New York Auction. These circumstances should be transient and hopefully we will return to more normal conditions soon. I know the efforts that GWCT are putting in to ensure that this is the case.

GWCT is a very special organisation. It is funded almost entirely by membership, private donations and fund raising by county committees. It will get the occasional government grant and corporate donation, but the bulk of its income is private. It is, compared to the

behemoths of the UK conservation industry, small. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), one of the largest and most aggressive players, turned over 142 million last year and spent on fundraising and 'inspiring' alone nearly eight times GWCT's total annual budget. Despite this extraordinary imbalance, GWCT's research budget is on a par with RSPB's and our peer reviewed research is critical in bringing balance to the UK's conservation policy decisions.

One of the reasons that the Conservancy has always been in the mix is that we differ from the conservation lobby in an important way. Essentially, their business model is based on failure. They identify species that are getting rarer and ask for lots of money to save whatever it is, irrespective of whether they have any idea of how this can be done. GWCT's approach is to use field research to develop adjustments to agricultural practice, habitat and predator control that can solve the problem, often at low cost. This is rarely popular with the conservation industry, because curing the problem is detrimental to their core strategic function of fundraising.

Salient and recurrent findings of GWCT's research are simple but vitally important. **Properly conducted game shooting and game management are a sustainable land use and a force for good in the countryside.** They meet the criteria of the Rio Convention on Sustainability, providing multiple benefits to the environment, the economy, the society, and the culture of those involved. What we do is both sustainable and beneficial. Without GWCT's science this would have been impossible to demonstrate with sufficient rigour to convince politicians and civil servants otherwise. However, the need for your help has never been greater. We are faced with vast and powerful organisations who are intent on attacking the culture and society that embrace game shooting, who have no wish to be contradicted, and who will use



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their wealth to ruthlessly promote their own interests. Furthermore, they have seized the opportunity created by chaos of the covid pandemic, the fallout from Brexit, and the arrival of unelected individuals in the heart of government to further their agenda.

To this can be added, that faced with the horrendous costs and political consequences of reducing carbon emissions, politicians are happy to divert huge sums of money toward anything that will provide a few minutes of positive news coverage and not cost votes. This has resulted in putting the heather of the grouse moors on the front line, where generations of moorland managers have kept the vast stores of carbon safely locked up in the underlying peat.

Now, the traditional owners and managers of these wonderful and biodiverse landscapes are all that stand between the conservation industry's pursuit of a huge and perpetual pay day, where the taxpayer would pay them for keeping peat 'safe' by doing nothing. Despite compelling evidence that abandoning traditional management greatly increases the risk of uncontrollable wildfires that would burn millions of tons of peat, a huge effort is being made to ban rotational burning, at a time when the rest of the world is re-instating it.

The stakes for conservation are very high. Grouse moors have been repeatedly recognised internationally as rare and wonderful places, supporting unique species and enjoying the highest levels of conservation designations: Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Protection Areas (SPA), Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (ANOB), and frequently, all of them at once. **They received these designations because of the way they were managed - not despite it.** Now everything is to be turned on its head. What was good is now bad. The methods that have maintained these places are to be banned, and people who have never managed anything other than a clipboard are seeking to wrest control from the owners who have maintained them for generations.

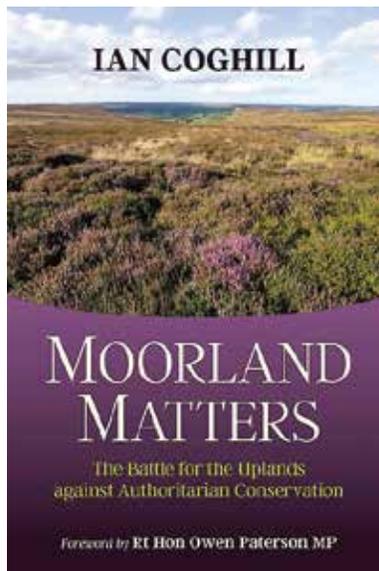
The line of attack is simple but dishonest. It is claimed that grouse moors are rich men's follies, where precious peat is burned to create unsustainable levels of grouse, simultaneously causing global warming, flooding, and biodiversity loss. Though shockingly false, it is a line that is promoted by rich and powerful conservation organisations such as the RSPB, and it is getting traction in the urban media. It is a sorry example of an old adage, that a simple lie can often beat a complex truth.

Last year, I authored a detailed rebuttal of these disgraceful assertions which was published as a book *Moorland Matters*. It is intended to set down in one volume the case for continuing to manage grouse moors as they have been for centuries. It has been well received by a broad spectrum of our community and is available to GCUSA members upon request. I can only hope that many of you will find it interesting.

GWCT stands for policy based on science, which has clearly shown that our chosen and traditional way of life is not

only entirely sustainable, but better at producing wildlife than many so-called nature preserves. It is also a way of life that has its own intrinsic worth and is as entitled to respect as any other. Thus, it is fair to say that what GWCT and GCUSA seek to do is both noble and altruistic. Both organisations exist to preserve the best of what is good, a way of life that, for those who love it, cannot be bettered, and a landscape as replete in wildlife and game as is practically achievable.

Many of you have enjoyed shooting in the UK and have seen for yourselves the quality of the experience, the way all sections of local society come together on a shooting day, and the beauty of the surroundings in which our sport takes place. This is not accident or happenstance. Rather, it is the result of generations of decisions made with game and wildlife in mind, decisions to plant woods and game crops, manage heather, suppress bracken and invasive scrub, control predators and so on. The wonderful experience we share on a driven day on a great estate is the tip of an iceberg,



supported by hidden generations of dedication and planning, and the expenditure of much treasure, all of it private. If ever something was worth fighting for, this is it.

This brings us back to the New York Auction. I cannot overemphasise the importance of your auctions over the years, nor our gratitude. Whenever the auction takes place you should always bear in mind that money is just paper, metal or a figure on a screen. Far more interesting are the opportunities a GCUSA auction presents to obtain an experience both rare and unforgettable. One of the joys of buying a GWCT auction lot is that often what is offered is otherwise inaccessible. To give an auction lot, especially a day's shooting, is a real test of commitment. Only the best people are prepared to give days and they will do their uttermost to make the day as good as it can be. On the other hand, it must be said that the teams of GCUSA guns who travel to the UK have an enviable reputation for maintaining the very highest standards of sportsmanship and gentlemanly conduct, standards which some UK sportsmen would do well to emulate.

Rest assured that every cent that crosses the Atlantic to help GWCT is spent on the core business. You only have to go into the HQ at Fordingbridge and examine the state of the carpets to see that money is not spent on bells and whistles, but on producing and promoting the science and thus influencing the development of sensible government policy. It is also worth noting that these policies, though designed for UK conditions, are also most relevant across the ocean. What is going on in the UK now is often a precursor for what is to come in the US. Thus, GWCT science may well prove of critical importance far from where the research was initially conducted.

Despite my necessarily dwelling on recent problems, the full picture is not bleak. Ours is still the best place in the world to shoot driven birds, and there is still joy to be had in abundance. Driven game shooting in the UK remains in good health, and thousands of days of shooting of the highest quality will take place every week across the country. I remain in awe of all you have done to keep it that way. It was a privilege to be invited to speak at your auction and a delight to meet so many of you in New York last year.