

# Sunart Fields Questions and Answers

Transcript by Ian Short, from a Zoom presentation by Rachel Evatt to RFNS  
on Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> March 2023

*Sound quality was sometimes poor, so apologies for any misinterpretations of what was said.*

Charlie: I was at the AGM on Tuesday of the Friends of Alkrington Woods and the Ranger was present and told us that under Biodiversity Net Gain we were being awarded £80 000, which is more than the usual [amount of money, so at least there will be funds available for work needed after a development]

Rachel: *Thanks Charlie for sharing that, and I think that at least there's more of a financial penalty associated with any habitats affected from development and a very real need for developers to think twice about.... You know, hopefully, in many cases that's going to put off developments on sites that are rich in biodiversity because there's just much more of a penalty to that. If development does need to take place for whatever reason then at least there's some offset for landholders where developments might not be housebuilding, but are perhaps intensive farming having a poor effect on biodiversity and nature. The very fact that to benefit from net gain [means] the land has to be in a poor condition to start with in order to achieve a gain. So what this hopefully does is to enable patches of land which have been treated poorly in the past to be restored for nature, at the price of private developers that are undertaking development, with a market that's administered centrally, and through LPAs, of course. As you say, it's not all good, but hopefully it brings the financial price of nature a bit more to the forefront, and I think we'll see this talked about much more as it becomes legislation from this November*

Karen: I'm interested to know what your neighbours think, Rachel, because I remember reading Isabella Bird's account and even after they got to the stage where they were proving that they had a viable economic model, neighbouring farmers weren't keen to follow their example. [I also know a similar case in Yorkshire] The answer I've heard is that farmers want to farm, and what you're doing isn't perhaps seen as farming.  
What do your neighbours say?

Rachel: *That's a really good question!*

*We've got two farms which border our land, and I'd add to that the existing farmer who has retained a bit of grazing land. I think we haven't had any objection or reticence to what we're doing...we've got a good relationship in fact, a little bit arm's length in the sense that they've got different models that they're working towards... they're getting on with what they're doing, we're getting on with what we're doing ... it's not a case of either challenge or 'well that looks good we'll take that on'.*

*Having said that we have had conversations with farmers in the local vicinity, a couple of which are with slightly younger farmers that are inheriting the family farm as it were, and are seeing the economics changing very quickly, with basic payments being reduced and so on, and I suppose being quite aware of the wider picture, and them being landholders in a position to*

do something, and considering other options. Unfortunately they're not in a position to move, now, in this direction, not in this case because they don't consider it farming and don't want to, but purely on financial grounds. So actually, when ELMS becomes a bit clearer, and some of the other policies around, say, Nature Based Solutions and the economics associated become clearer they'll be in a position to make more of a decision and move in this direction.

I haven't encountered that feeling that 'well, actually that's not farming', because if you look at the way that a lot of local farms are managed a good portion of their income is from letting out paddocks for equestrian use, and from B&B, and a much smaller part from traditional beef and sheep farming. So a lot of farmers that I've experienced are very attuned to the fact that they have a portfolio of revenues and they are happy to adapt based on what makes the most sense for the land and economically. So I expect over the next 5 to 10 years there will be a lot of change on that front, but of course the economics need to be there to convince people to make those moves, and that's why we're particularly interested in seeing can we prove anything through investing in pilots and so on. We'd love to come out the back of it with a blueprint that we could say well, actually, will help you to do a similar type of thing.

**Karen: [But it might be more difficult on marginal land, like in the Pennines]**

Rachel: But that's the risk, isn't it. Ideally you'll be in the position where people that have been present on the land are benefitting from the change of use there, it just might look like a different makeup of revenues. It comes back to that concept of portfolios – if people are wanting, quite rightfully, some sort of compensation for using the land. Locking up the land is for the long-term for these purposes, but also there are complementary businesses that can be run on the back of it. Certainly Rewilding Britain expect quite a growth in a 'Ranger' type role, which is a mixture of ecologist and hands-on land manager, that is there to show people the nature that is residing as well as practically to manage the land. I think there's an openness and willingness among younger farmers to move in that direction

**Vinny: We're rewilding a wood near us at the moment, it's got 3 of the top 4 invasive species in it, so I'm interested in the dock problem – you said you might re-seed it – have you thought any deeper into how you might get rid of that?**

Rachel: Yes. We tried a couple of things. We tried the pigs, in terms of will they disturb the turf sufficiently to expose the bare ground enough to allow us to use the seeds we'd generated from the wildflower meadow (as well as some seed that we'd bought in). That's been successful in areas that haven't been as heavily slurried, but in areas that have been, unfortunately that hasn't worked and in some cases has made the problem worse by exposing dock seed residing in the soil and giving them more opportunities to germinate. We came to the conclusion by experiment that planting in amongst these fields was probably the best thing to do because it was unlikely that much natural regeneration through wind-blown seeds or jay-planted seeds would take place as there was so much competition with the dock. But one thing we did see was that where we planted the early hedgerows and so on the richness of the soil in nitrates was just so wonderful for tree saplings that they just grew at a phenomenal rate, so they would be able to compete with the dock. Some of the saplings that were yey high 3 years ago are already beyond 6 ft high. You'll see that when you come and walk around. So we knew that planting was the way to go if we're going to see anything happen quickly in the dock areas. But we had problems in the very heavily dock infested areas... a) it was very hard to

plant in amongst the root-balls of the dock, and b) there was quite a lot of competition from the dock. So we took the very unfortunate decision to spray with 'Dock Star' – a single year's treatment of that last year. We cut and sprayed, and that allowed the conditions to plant this year. That's not a decision we took lightly because ideally we'd have done it without any of that type of intervention, however, the rationale was that it was a one-off treatment to allow the trees to take hold and thrive. We won't be doing that again in the fullness of time. Another thing we were able to do as part of that application was to get funding to add in a woodland grass mix into the sward – hopefully that will take hold and we'll have a more diversified understory as we go forward.

Two other things I wanted to mention when it comes to invasives. We have a little bit of rhododendron on the margins of some established woodland, and that is a real problem if that takes hold so we've been treating that through cutting it right back and putting some glyphosate on the stumps, which seems to be the only way to get it under control. The other invasive we have is Himalayan balsam – we're pulling that by hand. It was pretty bad the first year and we spent many a day up to our necks in jungle-like conditions pulling out the balsam. It will probably be an annual thing – if we have the odd stem then it doesn't matter too much but we're trying to really get it under control..

Vinny: There's a problem in one of the meadows – it's a very high quality meadow near where the wood is. Lancashire Wildlife Trust came and did a survey and found it's one of the better ones in Greater Manchester. But it's got a lot of ragwort all over the place. They tried to spray it. But it didn't work and it's now even worse. It could be a very good meadow if we can find a way of treating it, other than pulling it up by hand.

Rachel: On that, I'd say that spraying in order to allow smaller grasses, herbs and flora to compete is probably going to need long-term conservation management and I'd be, as it sounds like you are, reticent to go down that approach. The area we used the spray was to allow the trees to take off and then they should out-compete and we see that happening already. Ragwort has clearly got a benefit – a certain amount of it – we don't want these mono-cultures. Unfortunately previous treatments – spraying and over-grazing – tend to lead to this mono-culture. So it might mean that a bit of hand-pulling is necessary. The other thing is yellow-rattle as a predator to the grass, and once that takes hold it does actually out-compete the ragwort as well. Then it makes way for other things. So if you can get hold of yellow-rattle seed, or harvest seed from some you have already then that will help.

Vinny: It needs to happen as soon as possible. The pressure on us is the field is used by horses and the owners are on to the Park all the time for spraying. There are a lot of wildflowers in the field and everything is being killed except the ragwort.

Rachel: Ragwort was one of the things we showcased at the RHS – the first time that had been done – and it caused quite a lot of controversy and we had a lot of this discussion. I referred back to somebody's work who provided a lot of evidence that ragwort isn't as poisonous as it's made out - it's often portrayed as the devil in the field when it comes to horses. But actually some of the earlier statistics were grossly exaggerated, so it might be a counter-argument to use.

**Vinny: [I tried that but the misinformation has got into these people's heads]**

*Rachel: Good luck with it, it's probably just a case of banging away with the arguments.*

**Vinny: Have you had any problems with squirrels in the owl boxes?**

*Rachel: Yes, at least one of them the squirrels have taken up. Ironically, actually, the barn owl near that box chose to nest in the cavity of an ash tree that has suffered from die-back and has usable cavities, so in some ways it doesn't matter – they've found a place to roost. Grey squirrels will be a bit of a problem in the fullness of time but we're not tackling that at this moment. It might be something we have to address if we want to bring the red squirrels back.*

**Pete: Has your local authority been involved in any way? Have they supported you or not?**

*Rachel: Yes. At a couple of levels – there's the LPA (High Peak) and Derbyshire. We got to know one of their land managers who took an interest in what we're doing. They came over and had a walk round and we discovered that there's ecological connectivity to a site that they own just up the road and on the back of what we're doing they've been able to protect their site for the long term for ecology, so that's been a really good win – future supporters. We've had less to do with the LPA at this point. They don't have an ecologist in house, they work with the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust. We've had a lot of interactions with the Wildlife Trust. They know our site really well and are, as you'd imagine, quite supportive. So certainly no objections. We have had to have an Environmental Impact Assessment done. That's done through the Forestry Commission and the Local Authority have an input to that. We did have a bit of a discussion with the landscape officer about whether what we're doing is 'culturally acceptable'. Fortunately Natural England, Forestry Commission and other members of the Council were very supportive. Ultimately we can show that, through drone footage that it fits in with a lot of scrub that's developed on surrounding hills. So, no issues, and some proactive support as well.*

**Pete: Will you be introducing any native species, butterflies and the like?**

*Rachel: Absolutely, we'd love to do that. First port of call in this intervention phase is to establish the habitat. In some cases species will arrive to that habitat spontaneously. In other cases habitat might be there and they might have thrived previously, but if there aren't any local literal bodies to make their way there, then we'll be looking to reintroduce them. We have the benefit of Derek Gow, who you might be familiar with – he's pretty infamous in terms of beaver reintroduction - but he also does a lot of small species reintroduction as well. He had a look at our site and gave us some advice over some of the habitats we might be developing that could support different species. So some of the things we're looking at are harvest mice, water vole, butterflies – some of those things that would have been here and we have the beginnings of the right sort of habitat, but we need to improve things to bring things back. We have done some species introduction in terms of the flora that's here – we've been planting a lot of juniper, which would have existed on the hills – it thrives in Cumbria for example, but we've done a good job of getting rid of that in Derbyshire – so we've done a lot of planting of that. And some of the tree species, like the Wild Service tree that we have here, we don't see much of that so we've been planting quite a bit of it. In recognition that all of those*

*have a compatibility relationship with different insects and so on. So by creating a diverse flora we hope that these aerial species will find a way there.*

*We're not sure we have enough of the right trees or water for beaver – but we've got an eye on Derbyshire Wildlife Trust doing that in the Goyt valley, so you never know!*

**Vinny: Are there any frogs, toads or snakes?**

*Rachel: Yes. We're at the beginning of surveying those species. This year we're doing a reptile survey to see what's residing there. We've observed frogs, toads, and newts have made their way to the ponds – they seem to find their way without needing much help - but we haven't got a good idea about reptiles yet. We know there are lizards and slow-worms in the general vicinity and there's no reason why they shouldn't survive and thrive on our land, but we don't know whether they're there already and just need some encouragement or whether we need to do some reintroductions. We're certainly open to that.*

*We've got some reptile mats out at the moment, so it'll be interesting to see whether we have any snakes present already. I don't think there are. Unfortunately due to the farming history there haven't been any ecological surveys done prior to us taking the land on and we're starting from the beginning. So it will be really interesting to see if there's anything there. We're up for reintroducing everything!*