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The Cultural Politics of Hunting: Sporting Estates and Recreational Land Use in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland

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Sporting estates are a form of private hunting¹ reserve covering extensive areas of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and have been the focus of debate regarding their legitimacy from moral, political, economic and social perspectives ever since their establishment in the nineteenth century.² In recent years, a growing debate about sustainable land use, access to the countryside, 'blood sports' and land reform has led to sporting estates being subjected to a continuing critique from environmentalists, land reformers, crofting tenants, community interests and politicians.³ The sporting estate is thought to be unique in modern industrial democracies and, as the legal, political and social framework which governs much of the hunting economy, perhaps has its closest parallels with the private game reserves of some African states. Certainly, in comparison to other European countries, where they do not exist, sporting estates are a distinctively Scottish phenomenon.

Owners and managers of sporting estates are increasingly finding themselves drawn into a debate about the role and validity of such estates. The re-establishment of a Scottish Parliament in 1999 led to the emergence of new public policy agendas on rural development and land reform, topics which were neglected at the UK level owing to a shortage of parliamentary time and the vested interests of the many landowning members of the House of Lords.⁴

This article offers an analysis of the role of sporting estates in recreational land use. Is hunting a form of recreation and, if so, what is the relationship between hunting and sporting estates? For the purposes of this analysis, the article concentrates on evidence derived from deerstalking, which represents the most widespread and historically dominant form of hunting, the one with the closest association with the sporting estate phenomenon, and the one which has been subjected to most (albeit still limited) research and analysis.⁵ Importantly, the article does not concern itself with the question of the legitimacy or otherwise of hunting as an activity. Its purpose is to examine the influence which the sporting estate as

a landholding has had on hunting and other forms of outdoor recreational land use and how this is reflected in the development of public policy.

The Origins of the Sporting Estate

Social and economic change in the Highlands and Islands in the nineteenth century has been extensively analysed.⁶ In a period which witnessed the Highland Clearances, dramatic transformations in landownership, famine, cultural transformation, depopulation and widespread political unrest, one enduring legacy has been that of the Highland sporting estate. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Highland economy was relatively buoyant thanks to cattle, kelp (seaweed), sheep-farming and fishing. By the end of the century, however, the cattle had all but disappeared, the kelp economy had collapsed, the sheep had come and gone and large numbers of people had emigrated or been evicted in the Highland Clearances.⁷

During the nineteenth century, deer forests – areas of land cleared of sheep and converted essentially to hunting reserves principally for the stalking of wild red deer – developed in the Highlands and Islands. As one account of developments put it:

To make a deer-forest was simple enough, provided one had the money. All one had to do was to buy a large piece of hill land, build a suitable house on it, clear the ground of sheep, and wait for the numbers of deer to build up – which they did with surprising speed.⁸

One writer recently observed that:

Everybody who was anybody in 1850 wanted a Highland sporting estate. There were plenty of takers in the Victorian world of burgeoning industrial capitalism – an emergent class of nouveau riche, redolent with competitive snobbery, desperate to emulate a traditional land-owning aristocracy.⁹

In 1811, there were only six or seven deer forests which were actively managed for hunting.¹⁰ By 1873, however, the number had risen to 79 and, by the end of the nineteenth century, there were between 130 and 150 deer forests covering 2.5 million acres. The greater part of the region had thus been converted into a vast outdoor playground for the upper strata of British society, notable among whom was Queen Victoria herself, whose husband Prince Albert first leased Balmoral Estate on Deeside in 1848 and later purchased it in 1852. By 1906, deer forests extended over around 3.5 million acres. By 1957, the last date for which accurate figures are available, there were 183 deer forests covering some 2.8 million acres of Scotland.¹¹

Such developments took place within a wider process of social and cultural change, involving the redefinition of the cultural geography of the Highlands and Islands whereby selected traditional cultural icons were resurrected and developed quite consciously by landowning and social élites to form a new cultural genre. This was a process which began in earnest on the occasion of the visit of King George IV to Scotland in 1822¹² and which has been popularly referred to as 'Balmorality'.¹³ The growth in sporting estates, for example, led to specialized cultural inventions such as estate tartans or tweeds. The wealthy *nouveau riche* tenants and landowners were keen to mimic perceived indigenous customs and, in an attempt to appropriate the traditions of clan chiefs who supplied their retainers with clan tartan, they had tweeds specially designed for use by themselves and their staff, a practice which still continues.¹⁴

This phenomenon persists today in the form of a fascination with Scottish clans, tartan, and Highland Games¹⁵ which, despite being popularly regarded as both traditional and Highland, represent a substantial modification, codification and re-invention of indigenous traditions.¹⁶ Such traditions have subsequently become firmly implanted in the popular consciousness through the vivid depiction of the Highlands by painters such as Landseer (1802–73) who enjoyed royal patronage and whose depictions of Highland life reflected very explicitly Queen Victoria's self-image of the Royal family in a 'tranquil, loyal Highlands'.¹⁷

The spread of sporting estates was intimately bound up with such social trends. An agrarian peasant economy organized in kinship groupings had, over a century or so, become decisively transformed into a capitalist hunting estate economy. Ownership and control of land became concentrated in the hands of a wealthy élite whose social and economic roots lay largely outside the region and whose principal interest and motivation for holding land was the social status it afforded, together with the private enjoyment of hunting. Whilst agriculture and, to a much lesser extent, forestry were also significant economic activities, they took place within a landholding framework dominated by large sporting estates where concerns over game management were (and continue to be) the over-riding preoccupation of proprietors.

The Sporting Estate Today

There is no official definition of what constitutes a Highland sporting estate. The term is commonly used to describe relatively large landholdings which have been developed principally to facilitate hunting activities. Despite isolated studies which have characterized and analysed landholdings,¹⁸ it is impossible to characterize definitively the range of landholdings which

currently exist in Highland Scotland owing to a lack of good data. In the absence of individual profiles, for example, the motives and objectives of proprietors are difficult to assess.

This article relies on an interpretation of existing published and unpublished data¹⁹ to provide a preliminary assessment of the extent of sporting estates in the Highlands and Islands. Sporting estates are defined here to include landholdings in excess of 2,000 acres where the dominant or exclusive estate activity is the pursuit of game or where this is the principal motivation of the proprietor. Excluded are owner-occupied hill farms, forestry holdings, and long-established landed estates (except where parts of an estate have been obviously delineated as hunting grounds by the erection of shooting lodges and associated infrastructure).

The classic Highland sporting estate is around 30,000 acres in extent with boundaries created in the nineteenth century from older and more extensive traditional landholdings. It will have a lodge built to accommodate the proprietor and visiting hunters (incorporating a gun-room and typically in Scots Victorian baronial style). It will employ gamekeeping staff and will typically be owned by a man from a family with substantial business or financial interests. The owner will visit infrequently and will often employ a professional estate agency firm to administer and manage the estate. Wigan and Satterley provide narrative and visual insights into the contemporary Highland sporting estate.²⁰

On the basis of these criteria, there are around 340 sporting estates in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland covering around 5.2 million acres of land, which represents over 30 per cent of the total privately-owned land in Scotland and over 50 per cent of privately-owned land in the Highlands and Islands. They therefore represent a significant influence in how land is used in the region. Today the typical Highland sporting estate is little changed in character from its nineteenth century origins. It is generally smaller and employs significantly fewer people but its owners continue to be drawn from the same kinds of background as their predecessors. The legacy of massive investments in infrastructure (lodges, roads, paths and fencing) of the nineteenth century remains, albeit in a depleted state in many instances, although significant new investment in upgrading lodges and associated infrastructure (including, for example, centrally-heated dog kennels) is taking place on a number of estates such as Ben Alder, Glen Avon, Corroul, Braulen and Strathconon. In addition, despite the conversion of some estates to agriculture or forestry, a growing number of new sporting estates are being created through the purchase of hill sheep farms and removal of sheep stocks.²¹

Before analysing the role of the sporting estate in more detail, however, it is worth examining some of the terminology, discourse and implied values surrounding them and their association with hunting as a recreational land use.

Sporting Estates and Contested Values

Contemporary attitudes towards sporting estates are strongly influenced by an array of cultural values which express themselves in often strongly held views about the legitimacy of sporting estates and their role in the modern Highland economy. These range from outright hostility and antipathy to all that they represent, to a passionate defence of their value in sustaining the rural economy.

One of the main advocates is Highland landowner, Michael Wigan. In his writing he presents a seamless history of hunting from King David I (1084–1153) to the modern day where the Highlander, the nobility and nouveau riche are embedded together in a cultural iconography of man the hunter, and nature. According to this view, today's sportsmen may have their roots in another culture but they are carrying forward a tradition which goes back into the distant past where Neolithic man hunted the same animals as the contemporary Highland sportsman pursues.²²

Such a perspective ignores the fact that, in order to consolidate hunting rights in the nineteenth century, a range of new laws were required. Although a range of statutes from mediaeval times onward reserved certain game rights to the Monarch and others appointed by him or her, by the end of the eighteenth century these had become effectively redundant.²³ Despite the Act of the Scots Parliament 1621 which barred hunting by anyone who 'hath not a plough of land in heritage' (a unit of landholding), deer and other species of game were regularly being taken by local people and by those from further afield since no effective remedy was available to proprietors wishing to exercise exclusive rights to hunt.²⁴ The development of the Victorian sporting estate ushered in new laws to protect game (e.g., Day Trespass Act 1832 and Night Poaching Act 1828) which, to many of the indigenous population, seemed alien and harsh.²⁵

This cultural alienation is evident in the Gaelic proverb which asserts that 'everyone has a right to a deer from the hill, a tree from the forest, and a salmon from the river'.²⁶ Such a view forms part of a wider belief system which has consistently found it difficult to reconcile the fact that 'the fish that was yesterday miles from the land was claimed by the landlord the moment it reached the shore'.²⁷

Such competing discourses continue to be deployed in contemporary debate. For example, in a recent television documentary about the

management of red deer, the then (English absentee) owner of Glen Feshie Estate in the Cairngorms, John Dibbin, claimed that 'the culture of a Highland estate is what we should be trying to preserve'. In response to this assertion, Angus MacRae (a resident Highland crofter) replied:

It would be impossible for me to accept that the sporting estate as we know it is part of the culture of the Highlands and Islands. It is alien, it is comparatively recent. To have culture, to have heritage, one must have community, one must have people. Deer forests, sporting estates, were established by getting rid of people and to claim now that they have done anything for culture and heritage is misrepresenting the facts.²⁸

MacRae, it should be noted, is incorrect in his assertion. Most sporting estates were created after the major period of forced evictions or Highland Clearances which occurred as a consequence of the introduction of large-scale sheep farming in the Highlands (the decline of which precipitated the emergence of sporting estates). Limited clearance did, however, take place, for example in the Eastern Highlands, in order to make way for deer forests.²⁹

Notwithstanding matters of historical fact, perceptions such as MacRae's derive from the speed with which sporting estates developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century, cultural hostility to Victorian game laws, the strong association between their owners and wider power structures (politics, finance and industry), the class politics of hunting, fishing and shooting, and the contemporary view that, in many cases, such estates stifle local development. Indeed, the fact that the sporting estate phenomenon persists today is testimony to the powerful influences which have developed and nurtured it even through times of crisis, such as in the inter-war period, when, 'a melange of romantic legend and imagined tradition was deployed in defence of the existing division of land, its primary use as a boundless game reserve and the much revered sporting tradition'.³⁰

Contested values have thus been central to the discourse surrounding Highland sporting estates. The characterization of sporting estates as a cultural abstraction developed and bolstered by landed interests and devoid of any meaningful Highland roots has remained part of the rhetoric deployed to great effect by critics of the regime.³¹ Despite such debate there remains considerable confusion surrounding the nature and status of both hunting and the associated role of sporting estates in recreational land use. The contested role and value of hunting and sporting estates to the Highland economy is accompanied by an often confused and contradictory set of assumptions and arguments about the status of hunting as a recreational activity. To explore this confusion it is first necessary to examine the ways in which hunting has been represented and to reach some sort of conclusion as to its status as a sport or form of outdoor recreation.

Hunting as a Recreational Land Use

The critic's lament of the vast acreages turned over to playgrounds for wealthy élites in part reflects the perception of hunting as a frivolous and unproductive activity compared with agriculture. Mirroring this view of hunting as play is the terminology developed by devotees of hunting which refers to 'country sports' and 'field sports', even 'pastimes' to describe the range of hunting pursuits. The widespread use of the word 'sport' (e.g., sporting estates) in particular testifies to a long-held recognition promoted by hunting interests themselves that hunting is a form of recreation. The Scottish Landowners' Federation, for example, recently claimed that 'Field sports are a healthy recreation'.³² Indeed, it becomes evident by reading the literature that has built up around hunting that such pursuits are quite explicit forms of recreation.

Hunting is even represented as a spiritual quest for the soul in this contemporary analysis of what makes deerstalking the 'quintessential Highland sport':

To shoot one of these well-proportioned, delicate, beautifully camouflaged and adapted animals is a serious business which gives rise in the rifle to thoughts of his own impermanence and tenuous adherence to life. Set against some of the most beautiful scenery anywhere, in one of the world's oldest and most weathered mountain ranges, which was once the height of the Alps, these intimations of mortality can reach a pitch of almost painful acuteness. The hills are eternal, and man is fiery and fit for a brief time.³³

To those familiar with mountaineering literature, such a perspective resonates with the experiences gained by those who spend time in the mountains for other reasons. As mountaineer and writer Bill Murray observed upon a winter ascent of Tower Ridge on Ben Nevis (Scotland's highest mountain):

A great stillness had come upon the world. We seemed to tread air rather than crusted snow; we were light of foot; we walked like demigods in joyous serenity. The intensity of our exaltation seems peculiar to the following of a rock climb to a climax of supreme beauty. After the hard fight on Tower Ridge we were elated by the miracle of sunset ... abnormally alive to the deep peace of the summit. Its grace flowed in upon the mind with a touch soothing and delicate ... In the silence I felt something of the limitation of personality fall away as desires were stilled; and as I died to self and became more absorbed in the hills and sky, the more their beauty entered into me, until they seemed one with me and I with them.³⁴

Despite the apparent and, to an extent self-evident, status of hunting and, for example, mountaineering, as forms of outdoor recreation, there continues to be some confusion among official bodies as to how to view them. The situation is not helped by the fact that a wide range of public bodies shares responsibility for different aspects (tourism, recreation, game management and sport) of outdoor recreation.

As a consequence of such disparate responsibilities, a range of attitudes and positions has been adopted by these bodies regarding hunting as a form of outdoor recreation. SportsScotland (the Scottish government agency responsible for the promotion of sport) recognizes most forms of angling (course, sea, game, salmon and sea trout, and wild brown trout) but on ethical and moral grounds does not recognize deerstalking, grouse-shooting and other forms of field sports which involve the shooting or hunting of live animals.

On the other hand, whilst the principal concern of Scottish Natural Heritage (the official Government body charged with advising on outdoor recreational land use) is with 'informal' recreational activities such as hill-walking, cycling, horse-riding and canoeing, they do recognize field sports as a form of recreation. Thus 'Other countryside recreations, such as field sports are part of commercial or private land use'.³⁵ The same policy paper concludes that, 'in large areas of upland Scotland recreation is now the main land use, either as a private or commercial use for field sports or in public use – or the two combined'.³⁶

The existence of such divergent perspectives has implications for the way public policy is developed towards hunting and sporting estates. These key public bodies have failed to develop a coherent and consistent perspective on hunting as recreation and this has led to confused policy-making in the field of recreational land use as exemplified in the recent debate about public access to Scotland's mountains.

The Politics of Recreational Land Use

Hunting is no straightforward form of outdoor recreation. It is associated (at least in the public mind) with élite endeavour, class delineation and morally questionable practices. The powerful forces behind sporting estates have thus never appeared entirely comfortable with the idea that hunting is simply a recreational pastime. In recent years, perhaps stimulated by public concern about the morality of blood-sports, hunting interests have played down the idea of hunting as a recreation. Instead of presenting the traditional view of deerstalking, in particular as the 'most noble of sports', these interests have promoted a complex mix of alternative rationales: a (non-recreational) land use in its own right, a vital part of game

management and environmental stewardship, and a critical component of the rural economy.

Thus it is claimed:

Country sports are part of the whole pattern of integrated land use in Scotland. Indeed they should be seen as a land use in their own right. Well managed, they provide much of our beautiful amenity in terms of woodland, moor and river. Country sports are a vital element of the rural economy and create many associated jobs. For too long they have been regarded simply as a leisure pursuit of the well-to-do'.³⁷

Furthermore, the Scottish Landowners' Federation Convener recently claimed:

Without shooting, stalking and fishing there is no question that villages would be threatened and schools closed. For six months of the year many, many hotels are largely dependent on sportsmen for business. They could not exist without them'.³⁸

This presentation of one form of recreation (hunting) as a land use with associated economic benefits has often been promoted in order to advance political interests to do with the ownership of land. Set against deeply embedded and articulated views of the role and validity of sporting estates, the complex discourse which has emerged has contributed to a lack of clarity about the status of hunting and to a lack of precision in the way in which the terminology surrounding the recreational politics of the hills has been applied.

For example, in recent years a substantial effort has been made to review and improve the arrangements for public access to land for both recreation and passage (Scotland represents something of an anomaly in the European tradition in not having access rights enshrined in law). This work has been conducted in the round table Access Forum by representatives of recreational users, landowners and land managers, and public agencies. Discussions and negotiations led in 1996 to the publication of a concordat on access to the hills and mountains of Scotland³⁹ and in 1998 to proposals for new legislation.⁴⁰

In the introduction to the Concordat it is asserted that 'more people are visiting the hills and patterns of open-air recreation are changing.' It then proceeds to claim that 'recreation is now a major use of the hills alongside the traditional activities of hill farming, forestry, field sports and deer management.'⁴¹ It thus implicitly denies that field sports are a form of recreation and promotes the notion that even if they are, they are different from other forms of recreation such as walking and mountaineering.

One of the parties to the negotiations on the Concordat has subsequently confirmed that, in a highly charged political climate where every word was fought over, the term recreation was used to mean 'informal recreation'.⁴² Such a distinction is reflected more explicitly in the Access Forum's more substantial recent work where informal recreation is defined as 'non-motorized activities, including walking, cycling, horse-riding, climbing, mountaineering, ski touring, canoeing, sailing, fishing and associated activities, such as camping, picnicking, wildlife-watching, sledging and play'.⁴³ The sensitivity of hunting is underlined by the inclusion of fishing as a form of informal recreation but the exclusion of other 'country sports'.

Given that hunting would normally be considered an informal rather than a formal activity, its exclusion can only be explained by the political sensitivity surrounding its relationship with sporting estates. The inclusion of hunting could, for example, risk opening up a debate as to why one form of recreation (hunting) has managed to develop a set of laws relating to game and public access which provide it with a privileged legal status.

Such a perspective has come to dominate discussions about outdoor recreation and has led to a bias in the way hunting is treated when compared to other forms of recreation. For example, the Access Forum produced a code of good practice for walkers, 'Care for the Hills', which stresses, for example, the need to avoid widening paths and the desirability of using public transport.⁴⁴ Hunting (not being a form of outdoor recreation) is not covered by any equivalent code and the construction of bulldozed tracks and use of motorized vehicles in hill areas to facilitate hunting activity, which has grown in recent decades, is thus implicitly accepted, despite such developments having had a far greater impact on the Scottish hills, particularly in sensitive areas such as the Cairngorms.⁴⁵ Similarly, the principle of the 'long walk-in' whereby recreational pressure is managed by means of actively discouraging vehicular access and promoting longer access by foot, is now a key feature of access policy in environmentally sensitive mountain areas such as the Cairngorms. Such a policy does not, however, apply to hunting since it is not considered a form of outdoor recreation.⁴⁶

Far more contentiously, the exclusion of hunting from a definition of informal recreation allows sporting estates to constrain access for other recreational users. The Access Concordat and other advisory literature highlights the need for freedom of access to the hills being 'subject to reasonable constraints for management and conservation purposes'.⁴⁷ An advisory booklet (providing details of landholdings in upland areas and advice on whom to contact for information about their activities) advises hillwalkers that 'contact should be made at critical times of the year and the visitor should be prepared to accept, on occasions, an alternative route in order to avoid disrupting the essential work of an estate.' In the same

publication the period from mid-August to mid-October is given as the 'most critical time'.⁴⁸

Given the fact, though, that the major 'management and conservation purpose' of deerstalking is the control of overall deer numbers, and that it is the hind population which is the critical factor in determining recruitment rates in a population, it is the October to February hind season that is, from a conservation and management perspective, the critical period. Highlighting concerns over the stag season may have more to do with protecting the commercial value of stag stalking and the private enjoyment of sporting estate owners. While such concerns are perfectly legitimate (if politically sensitive), their submergence in favour of arguments based on a rather spurious conservation case simply serves to confuse the real policy issues even further.

In spite of such an embedded discourse, however, and perhaps in response to a growing public debate about landownership and use, hunting as recreation has begun to re-emerge cautiously in arguments promoted by landowners and managers. The Scottish Landowners' Federation recently highlighted the importance of hunting not as a land use but as part of the tourism industry: 'Sporting tourism is an important part of the tourism industry ... [it] is indispensable in underpinning the economic sustainability of many rural communities.'⁴⁹ The Association of Deer Management Groups recently made reference to the 'integration of fishing, stalking and shooting tourism with other forms of outdoor recreation.'⁵⁰

Is this an attempt, perhaps stimulated by growing public debate, to legitimize hunting in its original terms as a form of outdoor recreation? It is certainly evidence of a strategy which may be seeking to ally the case for hunting with the case for other forms of recreation such as hillwalking which is rapidly becoming more significant in economic terms for the Highlands and Islands.⁵¹

Sporting Estates – A Private Playground

If then, as this article argues, hunting is a form of outdoor recreation, one might expect the landholding most closely associated with hunting – the sporting estate – to be represented as a recreational landholding. Despite the publicity given to the quality and extent of hunting available on estates in sales brochures, the political representation of sporting estates is rather more complex, as are the motivations of those who own such places. The sporting estate regime is often defended, for example, on the grounds of the contribution it makes to the rural economy. 'Sporting estates are not playgrounds, they are part of rural industry', claimed the Director of the Scottish Landowners Federation.⁵²

Furthermore, sporting estates, it is claimed specifically, are loss-making concerns and the inflow of revenue and capital by owners is therefore something to be valued and encouraged. Besides, there is no viable alternative land use which could replace hunting.⁵³ Such arguments rely more on assertion than hard fact and what limited data has been generated suggests that, whilst sporting estates are indeed loss-making concerns, this has everything to do with the way in which they are run and little to do with the economics of hunting *per se*.⁵⁴

The evidence even from those closely involved in the marketing and management of sporting estates suggests that altruistic motives (loss-making concerns) and objective analysis of potential land use (no alternative to hunting) play a very small part in the considerations of those who actually own sporting estates. *The Field* magazine which promotes the interests of the hunting world claimed recently, 'Scotland is the last place in Europe where a rich man can buy a large chunk of wilderness to act out his dreams of owning a kingdom as well as enjoying a wide diversity of sport'.⁵⁵ This may represent a rather more honest and frank interpretation of the role of sporting estates and a view which is reinforced by those directly involved in the marketing of sporting estates.

'Owning a Highland Estate has always been a rich man's sport. If it was just the stalking they wanted, they would rent it, which is much cheaper', claimed leading estate agent Andrew Smith of Strutt and Parker.⁵⁶ In support of this, one leading English landowner, and Council member of the Country Landowners Association, claimed rather bizarrely, 'You either own a Highland estate or you run three Ferraris, six racehorses and a couple of mistresses - I mean, the costs are much the same'.⁵⁷

In a recent analysis of why people buy sporting estates in Scotland, Smith's colleague and sporting estate specialist Andrew Rettie gives 12 reasons. These include the availability of large holdings, the availability of a range of field sports, seclusion, status ('there is no doubt that the ownership of a Highland estate in Scotland is a status symbol') and investment (capital appreciation).⁵⁸ No mention is made of the desire to contribute to the local economy or to consider anything other than sport shooting as the main land use. In one of the few academic surveys to have been conducted on landowner motivation and Highland estates, MacGregor and Stockdale (1994) conclude that in north-west Sutherland 'the dominant reason for owning an estate is private enjoyment, followed by as a capital asset and commercial sport'.

Therefore it is misleading to regard sporting estates as simply recreational holdings as this understates their significance in social terms. As a number of authors⁵⁹ make clear, sport in the form of hunting is actually a subsidiary motive for owning a sporting estate. Arguably, the primary

reason for the development and survival of the sporting estate for over a century has been the social status and private enjoyment afforded to the owner. Indeed, the whole social structure surrounding sporting estates (the big house, stalkers, ghillies and the social rituals of hunting) has been central to their development and to the élitism of hunting and the consequent cultural alienation of hunting as an activity to be enjoyed by the ordinary citizen.

Sporting estates can be regarded, to all intents and purposes, as 'private playgrounds' and this may partly explain why such holdings perform so poorly in economic terms (often making significant losses) despite attracting significant capital values. They remain central to any analysis of hunting and recreational land use and their future is therefore intimately bound up in such debates, together with those about land reform and the environment.

The Future for Sporting Estates and Recreational Land Use

Any useful debate about the relationship between sporting estates and recreational land use is hindered and frustrated by the ambiguous way in which their role is interpreted by public policy-makers and the paucity of data on their extent, ownership, and economic performance. It is further confused by the tendency of proponents of sporting estates to cite the macroeconomic impact of the hunting economy in defence of the sporting estate regime. Such an argument implies that sporting estates are part of the rational exploitation of the hunting economy which, as has been argued, in many cases they are not. It further implies that sporting estates are the only framework within which to manage hunting, an assumption which may or may not be valid.

In a political environment where government and public agencies have pronounced remarkable ambivalence about their future, it has been left largely to strident polemicists to hurl abuse at each other in specialized periodicals and in the newspapers. Faced with such circumstances, the more thoughtful sporting estate owners are making attempts to redefine their role, function and image.⁶⁰

But with land reform on the mainstream political agenda and a growing recognition of the relative economics of various forms of outdoor recreation,⁶¹ a meaningful debate is required about the place of the sporting estate in the modern outdoor recreational economy. The significance of this economy for the future of the Highlands and Islands was recently revealed in a study commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the main Government development agency for the region. It shows that hillwalking, mountaineering, and associated activities in the Highlands generates an

annual direct participant expenditure of almost £164 million, an income generation of £53 million, and employment of 6,100 full-time equivalent jobs.⁶² This compares with an annual direct participant expenditure on sporting shooting in the whole of Scotland of £78 million, an income generation of £28 million, and employment of 7,212 full-time equivalent jobs.⁶³ Such evidence backs up earlier assertions by Scottish Natural Heritage that 'recreation lacks any clear status as a land use or assured funding commensurate with its level of importance to society'.⁶⁴

There is therefore an imperative to promote serious research and analysis on how both hunting and other forms of recreational land use are to be developed and promoted in order to secure the obvious economic, social, environmental and health benefits they can deliver. But the historical legacy of sporting estates, the dearth of information about them, and the close association between this particular type of landholding and the wider politics of landownership and land reform, has meant that no meaningful view has emerged about the place of the sporting estate in the twenty-first century.

A casual look, for example, at the hunting economies of other countries with geophysical similarities to Scotland (e.g., Norway) demonstrates that such a landholding structure is by no means the only way of organizing and developing hunting or any other form of recreational land use. Alternative ways of organizing the hunting economy do exist in other countries (in Scandinavia and North America for example), which do not have a landholding structure dominated by sporting estates.

It is possible therefore that a hunting economy could be developed for the Highlands which did not involve the phenomenon of sporting estates as they are currently understood. The accelerating trend in the ownership of land by not-for-profit organizations, for example, which now own over 500,000 acres of land in the Highlands and Islands (only a proportion of which consists of sporting estates, however), suggests that this may be already be beginning.⁶⁵

Before such alternatives could be explored, there needs to be far more definitive and reliable information about the nature and pattern of sporting estates and their internal economics. There is also a need for the development of a clear and consistent public policy agenda towards the 5 million acres of land in the Highlands and Islands which are currently under the control of sporting estates. To do this effectively, this article argues, a fresh perspective is needed which recognizes three key issues:

1. Hunting is a form of outdoor recreation and should be recognized as such;
2. The Highland sporting estate is a complex social phenomenon which has little to do with the rational exploitation of the hunting economy; and

3. Sporting estates may therefore not necessarily be the most efficient and appropriate delivery vehicle for hunting and other recreational land uses over such a vast area of land and alternatives should be explored.

In other words, this article argues that hunting, together with other recreational activities, will no doubt flourish and a strong case can be made for its promotion and development. However, the role that sporting estates have to play in such a future is certainly unclear and may, indeed, be limited or non-existent.

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NOTES

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1. The term hunting in this article is used in its accepted international sense to refer to all forms of sport which involve the pursuit and killing of wild animals including deer, wild birds and fish. It is not to be confused with the term as used locally in parts of the UK to refer to fox-hunting on horseback with hounds.
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