Essay

Stewardship and resources

Globalisation and consumerism threaten to waste our natural resources and disinherit future generations. **Dr Rick Worrell** and WWF Scotland provide a careful analysis of the newly revived concept of stewardship

IN THE MODERN day, rights are things which have tended to become well defined. Responsibilities, on the other hand, have had relatively little attention.

Most would accept that a sense of responsibility to care for the interests of others, now and in the future, here and in the rest of the world, is deeply embedded in our personal and social psyches. It applies, among other things, to our care for nature and natural resources, often understood in the valuable but rather technocratic context of sustainable development. Looking beyond this buzzword it is possible to see the broader, more colloquial and ethical concept of stewardship.

Stewards and stewardship

Farmers and landowners are often described as stewards or custodians of the countryside. As citizens, we are encouraged to be careful stewards of the nation's resources. The term stewardship appears in codes of practice, certification schemes, incentive schemes, and government policy. However, the term is rarely, if ever, described or developed in a useful way. Common themes which appear include: being entrusted to care for things, individual responsibility, acting on behalf of others, and a commitment to high environmental, economic and social standards.

But the stewardship concept could be used more, to engage people's sense of responsibility for the natural environment, and to motivate personal and collective action.

During recent decades the management and use of natural resources in Scotland and elsewhere has been undergoing a fundamental evolution. Stewardship is a key term for advancing those issues, and needs to be part of the debate on resource use and ownership. It fills a critical void in our way of thinking about many of our interactions with natural resources.

There appears to be no widely recognised definition of stewardship. It is derived from *sty-ward*, someone who looks after farm animals, and has links with the term warden. Historically, a steward was an official appointed to care for the administration of a household or lands.

In Scotland, the royal title Steward of Scotland (or seneschal, and in Gaelic, Ard-Stiubhard) has been in use since the 14th century, reflecting a long tradition of guardianship on behalf of the public interest. More recently, stewardship has been used to describe a responsible approach to the task of caring for something on behalf of others. The term custodian, which has a similar meaning to steward, is sometimes used in relation to resource use.

A core meaning of stewardship is simply that people are entrusted with a responsibility to care for the community they belong to, for the land, and for other species. So stewardship has a strong emphasis on personal responsibility, which expresses our basic impulse to look after our surroundings. One important aspect of being responsible is taking account of the interests of others – other people, future generations and other species.

Adoption of stewardship encourages everyone to see him or herself as a responsible member of the local community and wider society – and therefore having some obligations as a member of those communities. As stewards, we all, whether owners, managers, or citizens, act not just for our own benefit, but also to increase the common good – that is the sum of public and private benefits.

Stewardship is...

- **Being entrusted to care for natural resources on behalf of society**
- **Individual responsibility, taking account of the interests of others – communities, future generations, and other species**
- **Accepting sensible conditions on how property is used**
- **Working for the Common Good**

A traditional description of a steward involves someone being entrusted to look after the property of other people. Thus being a steward is also a privilege – and most people would agree that the responsibility of looking after natural resources on behalf of society has many positive aspects.

Stewardship is distinct from approaches to ownership and use of resources which are based purely on personal gain, expediency, or whim and which may be indifferent to other people and other species. Some basic beliefs which stewardship challenges are:

- land and natural resources can be treated in absolutely any way by an owner or manager
- other people and communities have no legitimate interests or rights relating to land or natural resources other than through their role as consumers of products
- other species and the natural world

A culture of stewardship is vital. But, asks *Land&Liberty's* publisher Nicholas Dennys, can stewardship work in a top down system of control?

The ancient concept of stewardship of the land is regaining currency. At various times in the past it has appealed to the humility of the powerful, or to their religious sense. The force of the idea was to encourage the view that we hold our tenure here on earth for the benefit, not just of ourselves, or our own brief generation, but for God, or for our descendants who are yet to come in the gift of the almost endless future.

We see that the greater part of the assets of culture and wealth, on which we depend for our own wellbeing, have been bequeathed to us by past generations. The concept of stewardship appeals as the evidence grows of how we waste the generosities of nature and human community. In significant areas our ability to destroy and misuse is already greater than the capacity of the planet to renew itself. If this problem is not addressed, in fundamental changes of attitude and policy, the number of generations that might remain in front of us may well be less than they need be and their experience will be of a diminished world and greater struggle.

The WWF Scotland report on which our Essay is based, makes a strong

Making stewardship work

attempt to press the case for a wholesale adoption of stewardship, culturally and politically. But it uses as its method, perhaps unwittingly, an approach which belongs to the culture of the command economy. It makes the task one which is pressed by the enlightened few on the many. Stewardship is at its heart an act of celebration and valuing. That valuing is of something – the natural and human gift of our world – which has a different face to the many different minds and lives that value it. The diversity of that valuing is as important as the diversity of that which it values.

It is a profound error to present that act of valuation as one which can be made by the few – by some central authority – on behalf of the many. The WWF report urges, for instance, that for the full range of decision-making situations – economic, social and environmental – codes of good practice should be issued; that society's produce should bear product certificates and be offered through assurance schemes; there should be prizes and awards; there should be government policies and incentives with their expensive and time-consuming bureaucratic backup; every enterprise should make company and professional policy statements, rather like the numerous citizens charter schemes that displayed so much good intention in the past. A forest of paper and words will be unleashed. All this would be to some, but not enough, effect. And all this would need to be 'revisited' every year.

So how better, and without such weight of bureaucracy, can we celebrate, value and protect our natural and human environment? How can we strengthen stewardship? The only way to ensure that we collectively appreciate what is valued, and by how much, is to follow the community's individual members' own valuation of its resources.

What is needed is democracy in valuing. This means a careful collation of the prices put on access to natural and community goods, urban just as much as rural, calculated site by site, and expressed as annual rents. The market value of land is the result of judgements by millions of people as to the significance of land for them, based on their close and detailed knowledge of their own lives and needs, and those of their community.

At present such valuing is done in expectation that many things which should be duties of occupation can be externalised on to others or the community. The expression of the true value to the community of any piece of land is often distorted by the inadequacies of our present systems of planning and environmental regulation. With careful assessments the negative impacts of this can be fully costed.

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We should appreciate too that individuals occupy sites not only because of the advantage of present resources but because of what they believe their own interaction with the community will enable them to bring into being for themselves and others. We are each a resource to one another. Valuing is, therefore, also an act of informed imagination. Why else would land start to rise in value as soon as infrastructural development is announced and before a stone is laid? No central authority could hope to parallel this process. Armed with sound assessments site by site as to how people value access to their community and its resources, the community is in turn enabled to begin practising stewardship on behalf of all its members.

The effect of doing that would be to release the responsibility for stewardship – in its first manifestation as the act of valuing and celebrating – from the small meetings of well intentioned people who would try to second guess our judgements on our behalf, into the community. Furthermore, to base collective revenue gathering on that valuing, is to return to the community the value which the individual occupier excludes others from enjoying. This would remove the gain that entices speculating landlords to plant a flag on every natural resource from land to the human genome. This also makes the revenue payment a return for gifts and a return freely entered into, for each individual remains free to choose occupation of a site where the balance of advantage and cost seems best for themselves. The community can fund itself from community-created value and, with a careful and complete valuation of the potential of its resources, spend to preserve or enhance them, increasing its own revenue in the process. Thus creating an informed and effective stewardship. L&L

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are merely resources which can be used by mankind without inhibition.

As stewards, we should all accept reasonable constraints on our freedom of action – just as we do in many other aspects of life. While the basic principles of stewardship remain constant over time, their application in the form of personal action, standards and policies may change and evolve.

Who can be trusted?

Stewardship applies in its widest sense to everyone. This is because, first, we all have interests – and indeed some legal rights – in the way that common resources are managed, and second, because all our actions have an influence on natural resources, so we are all responsible for them. Stewardship can be seen to apply to several groups.

Citizens and *communities* can practice responsible stewardship. We all influence natural resources in a variety of ways – hence the need for stewardship.

Natural resource managers traditionally look after resources on behalf of the owners. In addition to this, they are now increasingly called on to protect and provide public and community benefits from those same properties. A major aspect of stewardship is to acknowledge a responsibility to deliver public as well as private benefits.

The *legal owners of land and resources* clearly have the strongest private legal rights, and often the greatest individual interest and the greatest responsibilities; therefore stewardship has strong messages for owners. Many owners would immediately accept that they are stewards on behalf of their children and heirs – who clearly have an interest in a property being passed onto them in good condition. Stewardship suggests a wider view than this, involving not just inheritors, but other people who have legitimate interests in ▶