

**Written evidence submitted by Anton Coaker and John Shears, Dartmoor Farmers
(LUN0107)**

Ref AC/EFRA 18 Aug 2026

Intro

This letter is addressed to Alistair Carmichael and the EFRA committee, and such MPs to whom it's relevant.

It is signed by active Dartmoor farmers, although its sentiments are undoubtedly shared elsewhere

Overview

As a hill/livestock farming community, we're feeling the burden of constant attack by the noisy minority of 'rewilding' special interest groups and individuals. Championed by the likes of journalist George Monbiot, the seductive idea that removing livestock, and ceasing any 'management' from the hills will somehow save the world has gained tremendous traction. To the extent that individuals within Natural England and other gov, depts. are now acolytes of the ideology.

They claim to be representing the public interest, when in fact, other locals, tourists and visitors we meet are almost universally perfectly happy to see livestock and farming in the uplands, and appalled at how inaccessible areas become when destocked.

It is also apparent that some very wealthy individuals are putting money into the rewilding agenda/lobby, presumably to somehow make themselves feel better about their wealth.

It shouldn't matter- we accept everyone has a right to their opinions. However, the crooked science and logic, and continued demonization has become entrenched, and makes its way through to policy.

As well as the landscape, it's now affecting our businesses, the future of our communities, our attitude to any genuine conservation movement, and, it must be said, the mental wellbeing of many of us.

Overgrazing

One of the tools being used against us is the claim that we're 'overgrazing' the uplands. The phrase is highly subjective- to some, any grazing at all is 'overgrazing'.

Current SSSI rules require that whatever vegetation was listed at designation* must remain present, or the site fails its assessment...and that is apparently our fault. This is despite it being obvious that outside factors like pollution and 'climate change' will inevitably lead to a change in habitats.

Regrettably, some officials are deliberately using this to persecute the ever decreasing livestock.

* The designations themselves are somewhat contested on Dartmoor, where we suspect much was largely a 'desk based' exercise.

Wildfires vs Managed Burning

There is now a fixation with stopping proscribed/managed seasonal burning of moorland- swaling as it's known in the westcountry. The excuse for restriction is officially about protecting peatland, when the reality is a muddle of prejudice against grouse moor management, and the knowledge that we use such burning to maintain a grazed landscape.

The evidence, not least from recent wildfires, is that continued grazing and managed burns are the best defence from uncontrollable out of season wildfire.

By definition, peat and wildlife isn't damaged by planned controlled timely burning. Compare that to wildfires.

Peatland

There is a widespread fixation on both protecting upland peatland, and 'rewetting' it to promote growth of more peat.

This, again, is a seductive notion, being used as greenwash to excuse continued use of fossil fuels. Everyone involved is clamouring to be able to claim the carbon credits/kudos, to the extent that somehow flying boulders to remote sites with helicopters is going to capture carbon.

On Dartmoor, huge areas of 'restoration' are being planned, by a cadre of organisations who won't accept our own observations that many places are already quite obviously recovering from historic peat digging and mining drainage works. Seemingly, they need peatland to be damaged so they can save it.

More alarmingly, Manchester University published a paper last year observing that the fast changing climate will, in the next 30 years, make conditions unsuitable for active peatbogs in the South of the UK in any case, and attempting to restore degraded peatland anywhere other than the North and West of Scotland is pointless.

Trees and Woodlands

The rewilding fixation with trees is important, as it wraps up several wistful myths and wishes. The concept is centred on the idea that trees capture carbon as they grow, which is technically true.

The devil is, of course, in the detail. Planting rowans, willows and hawthorns on exposed moorland will realistically capture tiny amounts of carbon, and as the trees die and rot, it is immediately released again. A 50 year cycle of carbon capture and release needs to be held against the continual release, by burning oil/gas/coal, of carbon which has laid safe underground for 350 million years. That's 350 million years.

We're not against planting trees. Many of us were already doing so, both as shelter for our livestock, and as a growing timber crop. That could be fostered with a different attitude, but once more, demonising us and our livestock is having the exact opposite effect to that desired.

Methane

A popular stick with which to beat us is the methane our burping cows and sheep produce. The most commonly used GWP ('Global Warming Potential') calculation counts this methane the same as that released by fossil fuel extraction and use.

It is hardly A level chemistry to see that the hydrogen and carbon with which ruminants make their methane burps comes from grass and rainfall. Both as part of a pre-existing, short natural cycle.

We can only conclude that the continued use of this red herring is a diversion from the real problem. We are being made scapegoats.

Species Reintroductions

To date, this has been less of an issue for Dartmoor, but is a steadily growing problem across the UK. Species reintroduction, being forced on farmers and land managers against their will, by people who won't be suffering the consequences, is a gross injustice.

The concept won't reset the environmental clock, and it's puerile to pretend it will. Meanwhile, speak to the communities suffering sea eagle predation, or land flooded by beaver activity.

The policy is creating very deep divisions.

Conclusions

We don't dispute that human activities are having a massive deleterious effect on ecosystems and bio-diversity. It could hardly be otherwise.

However, given that much of our hill farming activity and productive output is already almost 'carbon neutral', utilising untilled, unfertilised pasture and natural vegetation, it is a gross and wicked lie to claim we are a major part of this damage.

Indeed, we would respectfully point out that the livestock we rear is just about the 'greenest' form of agriculture in the UK. It is sustainable, just about carbon neutral, and simultaneously hosts some of the best bio-diversity left in a densely populated industrialised country.

Shutting our production down would radically alter that bio-diversity, while simply offshoring our former production somewhere else. Where is the 'gain' there?

What to do?

Government needs to grasp that the rewilding agenda is merely a conscience salving movement, founded on a fantasy, not science. Solutions to our environmental problems aren't going to be rosy, and the '30 by 30' nonsense must be called out for the fiction it is.

It is critical that the evangelist beliefs are not allowed to seep through to policy. Many staff at Natural England- and presumably devolved equivalent bodies- have gravitated toward such work with pre-conceived beliefs. Some have openly announced their intentions –to get rid of the livestock.

It certainly wouldn't be permissible if their personal agendas affected any other minority group.

Likewise, as with the corrupting influence of so many political donations, wealthy individuals shouldn't be allowed to buy influence in Westminster. If it can't be stopped, at least have the courage to call it out, and block its effects.

Most critically, stop allowing our entire community- working practical productive members of society, to be continually demonised, incrementally damaging our wellbeing and futures just so some urban dreamers can pretend they're 'doing something'.

The animosity and reaction growing within our communities is fast having a very negative effect, and we implore you to stop this poison before it's too late.

Signed as at 18th August 2026

Anton Coaker, Sherberton Farm, Princetown
(*Grazier on*) *Forest of Dartmoor*.

John Shears, Lower Nattadon, Chagford
Chagford Common