

Responses to Simon Thomas speaker questions from ‘Tried and tested solutions for a green recovery: Working with nature’ on 3 September 2020



Simon Thomas	Response
There is an environment bill going through, or about to go through, Parliament. Is restoring peatlands part of the bill?	<p>It's still a case of wait and see, I think. The forthcoming Environment Bill requires setting of environmental targets by 2022, to meet the ambitions of the 25 Year Environment Plan (2018). That plan mentioned peatland restoration specifically but gave no long-term targets. A DEFRA England Peat Strategy was promised by 2018 but has still not been published. It is expected to give ambitious long term targets, which will presumably be used for the Environment Bill, though we don't yet know how these will compare to the 2million hectare targets mentioned in the overarching UK Peatland Strategy, which all 4 devolved administrations signed up to. As anyone who follows the climate debate will know, long term targets are easy, it's the detail of what happens now that matters. All the targets in the bill will only be met if sufficient funding is made available, and if the new regulator is independent from government and given sufficient powers to hold them to account on meeting targets. Currently The Wildlife Trusts are concerned that the Environment Bill is not sufficiently robust to deliver on the warm words it promises. The following blog may be useful:</p> <p>https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/blog/will-parsons/new-environment-bill</p>

<p>How does your work relate to the debates about rewilding/effects of sheep farming?</p>	<p>I think we sit in the middle and look for practical solutions that suit each land owner/manager. Peat bogs can form part of rewilding projects or part of livestock farms. Intact peat bogs sustain themselves in the absence of sheep farming, but can also be grazed sustainably. I am concerned that many are now very dry and may be invaded by trees if rewilded without large-scale attempts to rewet them first. That would release far more carbon from the deep peat soils than could be locked up in the trees. In order to undertake peatland restoration we prefer to exclude livestock temporarily, to reduce trampling and allow plants to grow as fast as possible. Peat bogs can sustain much lower numbers of animals than grassland, as the vegetation is lower in nutrients and grows more slowly. Trampling also damages the delicate bog mosses that form the peat, and can initiate erosion where the sward is damaged. Historically, the numbers of livestock have often been too high, preventing the recovery of previously damaged areas and probably causing new damage in places, particularly when farmers have dug drains. Nowadays, a high proportion of upland farmers are in agri-environmental schemes where they receive payments from the government (formerly from the EU) for managing the land sensitively - usually restrictions on livestock numbers. Should there be insufficient money to continue these payments following an economic downturn, we would likely see some farms abandoned and others trying to intensify their operations to increase income.</p>
<p>How do we find who has peat extraction licenses?</p>	<p>I'm afraid this is outside my area of expertise. I believe that companies have to apply for planning permission from the local district council's planning department, so they may be able to tell you.</p>