

FARMERS – THE CARETAKERS OF A £1 TRILLION ASSET

Farming has received some bad press recently, which I felt the wider effects of while chatting with a grazier who was rounding up escaped sheep.

We suspected the poor animals had probably had enough of being pushed around the field by various dog walkers and attempted the ovine equivalent of The Great Escape. It turned out it was the second time that day that the grazier had to return the animals to their field.

It also appeared the presence of the sheep wasn't overly popular with some of the locals; one of who felt the need to complain about them being there. It left the grazier questioning why he bothered farming, if his work was not being valued.

Some might say you can't please everyone, although it sometimes feels like there is a growing lack of tolerance towards agriculture where it is seen to conflict with the right of others to enjoy the countryside.

What people fail to recognise, however, is that farming forms the foundations of – and plays an essential part in maintaining – the complex and sometimes invisible aspects of the natural environment they wish to enjoy.

What I am referring to is 'natural capital' and farmers and land managers play a big role in its management. They are one of its caretakers.

Most people don't even know it exists, yet it can have a global impact and its effects can be felt not only within our economy but also on our wellbeing. In essence, the term refers to the elements of the natural environment which provide essential goods and services to certain ecosystems which in turn, form the basis on which life as we know it exists.

Obvious services include the air we breathe and the water we drink; less obvious are the positive effects, for instance, on our quality of life from access to recreational space.

Natural capital is arguably all the good things that we can derive from the natural environment and its huge value is slowly being recognised. While some argue this is a priceless resource, the Office for National Statistics estimated its value in the UK to be worth close to £1 trillion in 2019.

Every day, farmers and land managers make invaluable contributions to maintaining natural capital and, if done correctly, these contributions can have a positive impact on a global scale.

Narrow it down and you can even start to quantify the effect natural capital has on our own economy. For example, walking – considered to be one of the most popular outdoor recreational activities – within the UK was estimated to be worth in excess of £347 billion in 2017 (the total value of all the economic inputs that come from engaging in that activity).

With 72% of the total land in the UK being agricultural, farmers and land managers are at the forefront of protecting and maintaining a substantial proportion of the natural environment that in turn provides part of the natural capital asset, outlined above, through the provision of footpaths, open space and the rural landscape. The benefits don't stop there, other natural capital assets, which those stewarding the land are charged with caring for, include woodlands that capture pollutants, hedgerows that provide habitats and grass margins that reduce eutrophication.

Farmers and land managers might not always get it right, but that's not for lack of trying. Remove them

from the equation, and you start to wonder who else is going to pick up the mantle of maintaining these assets.

Placing a financial value on natural capital could represent a fantastic opportunity for those involved in agriculture to highlight the numerous benefits they provide through their day-to-day activities.

After all, beyond those who have studied the subject there seems to be little or any acknowledgement of this, not least among the general public who can't understand the need for support payments. However, with more information slowly coming forwards about new subsidy schemes, it seems like the powers-that-be have started to recognise this.

It might be a bit of a rough ride, but over the next couple of years farming is in for a PR overhaul. As more information is released in a format that can be easily digested about payments for public goods (effectively a reference to payments for natural capital), I am confident all the benefits that farming brings will start to be appreciated by the wider community.

Let's hope that whatever comes next, in terms of support, results in a better informed general public as well as thriving rural businesses.

With any luck, as well as properly financially rewarding that grazier I was talking to for his efforts, it might even make him feel valued again.

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