

SHOOTING'S ROLE

Sporting community needs to highlight pursuit's vital place in rural 'ecosystems'.

All eyes in the shooting community have been focused on Wild Justice's demands for a judicial review into game bird release, but a lesser-publicised planning decision could also have big implications.

The authorities recently rejected an appeal against an enforcement notice which restricted the number of shooting days on a much-respected South Downs estate.

It was deemed that shooting for more than 28 days a year (ie that permitted under the 'General Development Order') would constitute a change of land use from 'agriculture' to 'mixed', leading the inspector to reject the appeal.

With the wider public's attitude towards the sport being, often at best, ambivalent, I worry this could indicate that planning authorities and the legal system will take a potentially tougher line on shooting elsewhere.

What those who seek to ban the pursuit often overlook, however, is how integral shooting is to estates and the contribution it makes to the countryside and the communities of which they form a part.

Take shooting out of the equation – or reduce the number of days allowed to the point where it becomes financially impossible to maintain and run a shoot – and you could lose everything from the benefit it brings for landscapes and biodiversity to the employment and tourism the sport fosters.

In this era of falling financial support for agriculture, shooting is – and will increasingly be – as integral to the commercial viability of many estates as growing wheat, rearing livestock or producing milk.

When we talk about rural 'ecosystems', it's not just the interconnected range of flora or fauna, it's

the delicate balance of commerce and conservation, business and recreation, amenity and employment, landscapes and culture.

The appeal ruling considered the shoot overall does conserve the relative tranquility of the area, but the Local Plan requires that relative tranquility should be both 'conserved and enhanced' by a proposal and, in the inspectorate's opinion, the so-called mixed use of agriculture and game bird shooting would not do so.

I was encouraged to see the inspectorate recognise shooting did conserve and enhance ecology and biodiversity – and this is apparent to anyone who visits the estate. It's buzzing with wildlife.

Between July and November 2019 (as was noted when it received a 'Special Commendation' in the prestigious Purdey Awards earlier this year), 68 species of birds were counted at Iford – 18 of which were red-listed (ie deemed to be of the highest conservation priority).

The inspectorate also noted that game shooting is a common activity within the countryside, including the South Downs National Park, and that the 'mixed use' did comply with the local plan policy to support farm diversification. It also acknowledged this mixed use would support the sustainability of the estate, providing rural employment and supporting the economic and social well-being of the local community.

Yet still the appeal was rejected in a decision that hinged largely on the 'tranquility' argument and the requirement of so-called 'development' to conserve and enhance the landscape and scenic beauty of the South Downs National Park.

Our countryside, we all agree, is a precious national asset, but it isn't a picture-postcard fantasy.

It's a place of work where livestock is reared and crops are grown to feed the nation (when the shelves emptied in the early days of lockdown, we became suddenly very mindful of this).

It looks, feels and functions as it does because generations of farmers and landowners have managed it in the way they have – which includes running shoots.

One only has to look at Iford's 'Whole Estate Plan' to see how farming and diversification dovetail to shape its vision as a "sustainable and resilient" place, driven by a desire to secure special landscapes for future generations, improve biodiversity and enhance the community's quality of life.

With many estates treating shooting as an integral part of their agricultural and land management endeavours, the prospect that it could come increasingly under the spotlight of planners – potentially rendering what they've done for years or generations subject to the same enforcement action as happened in this case – is worrying.

When dealing with planners, the shooting community will need to marshal an ever-stronger case, which will require expert opinion backed by data and evidence from professional advisers of the benefits the sport brings.

The industry's work in future clearly won't just need to be targeted at the likes of Wild Justice, it appears we could also have a growing fight on our hands with planning authorities.

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