

Crying the more crying the moor

Who knows what the future will bring, but we all have a responsibility.

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Another year passes and the farming cycle takes another turn. Writing this piece in June the good news is that the price for finished cattle has been up on 2015/2016. According to Farmers Weekly (2017) the price has fluctuated since the autumn between 354 and 367 p/kg dead weight for R4L graded cattle (good conformation slightly above average fat cover); last year it dropped to below 324. The finished lamb price was better last summer, not so good this spring, but has rallied recently. The downside for livestock framers is that one of the main ingredients in the concentrates that they use to supplement grazing and conserved grass, feed wheat, has been significantly up this year. Where it was hovering a little above £100/tonne ex farm last year, this year has seen prices above £140. Good for arable farmers, not so good for livestock farmers.

It is a complicated business, and sometimes when you are fighting with the vagaries of lambing and calving, the 'future' can seem a long way off, but we are now at one of the most important points in our history, possibly since the last world War. Yes I am talking about the 'B' word; Brexit. Much needs to be done in a short period of time. A whole variety of groups are trying to get politicians to hear their voices, not least the farming community where agricultural and environmental support has provided a safety net for farm incomes. British farms and our landscape would not be the same without support, however I do not think that farming and the environment are at the front of politicians' minds. All this has to be put in context. There are many farms around the world that are bigger than Exmoor. The Anna Creek Station in Australia is roughly 6,000,000 acres (24,000; km² or 9,400 square miles) which is bigger than the South West of England (23,800 km² or 9,200 square miles). Economies of scale make for cheap food and food can come from anywhere in the world. Ultimately though, decisions about the future are ours.

That is why I was disappointed with the way that the State of Nature Report (RSPB 2016) was interpreted by many. It is easy to blame farming practice for the decline in biodiversity and the quality of our environment and landscapes. I do not doubt that farming has had a significant impact, however, farmers produce what they are asked to, how they are asked to, as a result of the interaction of the market and government policy. Both the market and

policy are determined by 'society'; that is us. However bizarre this process is, the responsibility for this comes back to the individual voter and consumer.

If we say that farmers must work in a particular way that limits their 'productivity' then we should compensate them for this, either directly or by buying the food that they produce at a reasonable price. I have travelled the world looking at how food is produced in other countries. Our animal welfare and environmental standards are amongst the 'highest' in the world.

What we have is a system of 'high' standards (although all sorts of things could be done to change these), with some compensation, currently through the CAP. But we have a population that largely buys food on price, through a supply chain where the power is in the hands of large corporations -whose first duty is to their shareholders- and is dominated by low farm gate prices, with 'food' being bought from all over the world. Food is in inverted commas because I do not call things like tanks of protein slurry, food.

Everyone suffers. The producers get poor prices. Farms have to get bigger to be more "efficient", and rural culture disappears. The consumer gets poor food. Globally many starve and many others become obese. The natural world cries out in pain. This is my perspective. Many people are happy to see the current blame culture perpetuated because it hides what is actually happening and means that people do not have to take responsibility for their own actions. We need to be careful what we wish for.

Farmers Weekly, 2017. Prices and trends. 9 June 2017, p.136.

RSPB, 2017. State of Nature Report. Available online at:

http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/State%20of%20Nature%20UK%20report_%2020%20Sept_tcm9-424984.pdf [Accessed 16/6/2017].

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