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Does intensive grouse moor management benefit the UK uplands?

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Sport shooting of Red Grouse *Lagopus lagopus scoticus* first developed in the UK in the 1850s and today is practised across large parts of the English and Scottish uplands. The most intensive form, driven-grouse shooting, is unique to the UK, is reliant on sufficient post-breeding densities of grouse (>60 birds km²) and is apparently increasingly popular among shooters. Production of a surplus of grouse for shooting requires a range of management practices (vegetation burning, drainage, predator control, grouse medication) and additional grazing management carried out by staff (or tenants) employed by sporting estates. The heather-dominated habitat mosaic, a characteristic feature of grouse shooting areas, is a product of over 150 years of grouse moor management.

Many moorland areas are protected under national and European law and, in places, may be afforded protection as National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and, more widely, the upland ecosystem provides society with a range of ecosystem service benefits; much of our drinking water is sourced from grouse moors, deep peat soils storing carbon are the dominant soil type across some places managed for grouse shooting, and these same landscapes provide a range of recreational opportunities which are crucial to human well-being.

Advocates of grouse shooting argue that it is integral to the delivery of all these environmental and socio-economic benefits, is largely privately funded, and is a preferable alternative to subsidized farming and forestry in the uplands. But are these arguments sound?

Certainly, legal control of generalist predators and good habitat management for grouse can benefit some priority birds and other species. However, the routine and continued illegal killing of birds of prey, the questionable killing of mountain hares (for the purposes of controlling louping ill, a disease that can kill grouse), and the increasingly intensive burning of blanket bog and other carbon-rich deep peat habitats, often on Sites of Special Scientific Interest and/or in drinking water catchments, cast a long shadow over the environmental credentials of grouse moor management. Furthermore, the widespread treatment of Red Grouse with anthelmintic drugs (ingested as medicated grit) is claimed by grouse moor managers to have increased breeding success and post-breeding densities, dampened the cyclical nature of grouse populations and encouraged grouse moor managers to intensify management in areas formerly thought to be unsuitable for grouse production. Management is now more intensive and grouse bags higher than at any time since the 1930s. In parallel we note an increase in the number

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of Common Pheasants *Phasianus colchicus* and Red-legged Partridges *Alectoris rufa* being released in some moorland edge areas.

In this paper, we review the available evidence, present new data on the intensity of burning and its coincidence with deep peat soils, and question if intensive management for grouse shooting is in the best interests of the upland environment and society. Grouse shooting as practised today is weakly regulated. We identify a need for new regulation and better law enforcement and suggest that a reduction in the intensity of grouse moor management practices provides a more sustainable model for managing the uplands.