
FARMING TODAY, Wednesday, 20/05/2009, 05:45 on BBC Radio 4

Anna Hill hears predictions that the government's healthy-eating message could lead to a significant growth in the use of polytunnels. Research at the University of Reading suggests that if we all ate the recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables a day we would need to grow many more crops under plastic, leading to a marked change in the way the countryside looks.

AH: Inaccessible hills and moorland covered in scrub and a 100, 000 more hectares of polytunnels in the lowlands. That will be the fate of the British countryside if our eating habits continue to become more healthy. Scientists at the Rural Economy and Land Use program say the changes have already started. Philip Jones from Reading University is one of the researchers on the project which has made the predictions based on the Govs dietary advice.

PJ: Demand for dairy products is going to fall by 14%, demand for red meats is going to fall by 20%, and demand for sugar is going to fall. And there is going to be concomitant increases in demand for cereals and for fruit and vegetables. And as a consequence of that there is going to be an increased production of horticultural products in the S and E of the country where agricultural conditions are more favourable and very significant decreases in the production of livestock in the S and W, but particularly in upland areas.

AH: So are you saying that this is going to happen rather than this is what would happen if everyone ate their five a day fruit and veg.

PJ: Well Gov policies increasingly in the future are going to be directing us in that way and to greater or lesser extent they will have some success, but our modeling has also shown us that some of these changes are going to be taking place, particularly the declines in livestock production both in the lowlands but particularly in the uplands as a consequence of changes in the market place and the reform of the common agricultural policy.

AH: It may sound simplistic but it sounds to me as if you are saying that vast tracts of the landscape will be covered with polytunnels and that also at the same time it is possible that the upland areas will not be grazed as much and therefore could revert to scrub, both options of which sound possibly not attractive to people who like looking at the countryside.

PJ: I think that would be a necessary consequence of significant change in the national diet to a more healthy diet. Yes it would.

AH: So you are saying that would happen that we would have overgrown areas in the uplands and we would have massive swathes of plastic across the country in the S and E

PJ: I wouldn't say necessarily that we would have massive swathes of plastic but yes there would be some possibly intrusive changes to the appearance of landscape in the S and E of the country. In terms of the uplands. Yes. If there is going to be very significant declines in demand for dairy products and meat products then the uplands is going to be the area that suffers the most not only because of loss of demand for meat products in the market place, but also because of increased competition for the remaining market share from lowland producers. And there you will see anything up to a million and a half head of livestock lost.

Yes.

AH: That's sounds like an awful lot of animals. How significant then would the picture of the uplands be if that happens? What would we actually see on the ground?

PJ: Well the most hardest areas will be the most disadvantaged in agricultural terms. So that would be the severely disadvantaged areas, the high hills in the less favoured areas, and you would get between 50-100% loss of livestock production up there, and you would get encroachment of scrub, and those areas would become largely inaccessible.

AH: So in fact we will see bushes growing on there, bracken, briars, small sections of wood possibly growing up, so it wouldn't look like it does now are you saying?

PJ: It would look very different, yes. Depending on whether the land was abandoned, or whether very, very extensive production of livestock was taking place on there, or whether there was alternative land uses such as foresteering.

AH: And many people would regret that surely?

PJ: I think for many reasons it would be regrettable. The economic consequences for these already disadvantaged areas and the loss of a lot of a lot of agricultural production and agricultural employment will be very significant. There will be environmental consequences. We just don't know what the public's response will be to the changing appearance of these landscapes, coming to visit them and expecting them to be wide expanses of open access landscape and discovering them to be very inaccessible

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Ian Wood

Regarding uplands development your pet academic from Reading university is wrong to portray doom and gloom I would look with excitement at a decline in uplands stock to allow new species in and clearance of encroachment by other methods. What a good way to impose community sentence all paid for by the uplands subsidies unused by stock farmers and by the decrease in costs of a healthier Nation. Upland stock farmers have used the habitat "health" of uplands for some time to continue their financial support by tax payers what a chance for radical change.

Simon Llewellyn

Philip Jones at Reading University painted a dystopian view of rural landscapes if the government were to succeed in getting us to eat more fruit and vegetables (5-a-day etc). This seems like very flimsy research. If the drop in demand for meat and dairy products fell on the factory farming sector, this would not happen. A parallel campaign to promote low intensity or organic livestock production (and indeed to eradicate factory farming) would sustain the landscape and rural livelihoods. Your interviewer should have explored the issues more widely.

Eileen Cameron

Why does Anna Hill assume that uplands covered in scrub, bushes and trees is undesirable and unattractive? I hope upland grazing animals and the environment they create will not disappear entirely, but I for one would be delighted to see more scrub land and recovering forest in the countryside. Flowers and berries, all good for wildlife, might flourish more if

land is not so intensively and extensively grazed - especially the close grazing of sheep. Also, wasn't the speaker from Reading University forgetting that there are plenty of wild goats and deer able to fill the vacuum and keep the land grazed? No doubt if they do this too effectively - there will be calls to cull them because they are stopping trees and bushes from growing! Farmers give us much valued food - and for the record I am prepared to spend more for food and less on clothes. However, contrary to how commentators try to present things farming does not give us a varied landscape rich in wildlife. Some farmers are better than others at leaving small tracts of their land uncultivated to facilitate wild life, but for my money it would be wonderful if we could enjoy the luxury of leaving more tracts of land in Britain to their own devices.

Chris Hemmings

With respect to this morning's item on 5-a-day and futures for UK food production, please let it happen. As our greatest issue today is Climate Change then to restore marginal farming to woodland will start to clean up our atmosphere and stop adding sheep methane. Its woodland and not "scrub" as anything other than the sheep driven desert conditions that prevail now are derisorily termed in the farming community. When woodlands return to these areas we can lock up a billion tonnes of carbon, which is more than tokenism. Further, though, the land could and should still be managed. We must develop new ranges of skills and we'll find more not less life in rural areas. Please, dont be so negative - we should look to seize the golden opportunity this gives us. I'm not so sure about polytunnels in the South and East, though. Do we need all those strawberries? Obviously, though, the UK must move to grow more not less of its own food with a move away from livestock. Reality is a challenge - let's meet that challenge.

Sarah Eno

Why the scaremongering tone about the uplands becoming inaccessible due to scrub if grazing declines. (Thurs). It would be a very uneven development of scrub and woodland if left to nature (just look at where natural regeneration projects already occur). It is very unlikely to be so dense over significant areas as to be inaccessible to humans except on better soils and climates (which might be the last to be abandoned); why not have some inaccessible areas anyway; there would be enormous benefits to biodiversity - especially songbirds and black grouse reversing decades of adverse human impact; the visual effect of patchwork of uneven aged woodland and scrub is delightful in landscape and visual terms - look at parts of Cumbria, Wales and Lancashire. Less attractive would be even greater swathes of bracken (indicator of potential woodland however) and ankle breaking white ground (purple moor grass)! Counter to the arguments about decline in upland stocking - what are the likely effects of increased demand to feed the world and the need to be more self sufficient in the UK?

Beverley

Concerning the 5 a day article on Wed morning: Why should we be concerned about the land reverting to its natural state? Parts of the land may become impenetrable temporarily. Some gorse will grow. The brambles definitely will (they do here). However, everything in nature has a cycle. Brambles provide shelter for trees to grow, without the risk of being damaged by browsing herbivores. Once the trees become established (it doesn't take long) they will shade out the brambles, leaving space for ash and oak trees to push through. Ultimately we'll get oak woodlands again. There are very few trees on the uplands because they were cut down, and now the sheep keep them down. Keeping browsing animals off pasture land will allow the biocycle to start again. Trees growing on the upland slopes would slow down the rate of rain shedding off the uplands after periods of heavy rain. (Water runs off pasture lands 60 times faster than off woodland.) Trees will also lock up CO2 and produce oxygen for us to breathe. It is only green plants (including algae) that produce atmospheric oxygen

which is vital for most life forms. We will also need a lot more woodland in the near future as oil and gas reserves diminish. Even coal won't last indefinitely!

Oliver, Dorset

I do not have extremist views on anything, I do however, have an understanding which many contributors appear to lack. If you do not graze massive areas of upland Britain, you will find these areas are immediately over-run with weed species and rank grassland, species like gorse, bracken, thistles and so forth, because they are the dominant species normally kept in check by grazing animals. You will not find trees and lovely wildflowers springing up, you will get scrub, which to my mind is an absolute eyesore. Upland Britain is a popular tourist attraction, don't forget who is responsible for making it look as it does.