

Reflections on peatland, uplands and protected landscapes

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On 27-28 March, a two-day [LUNZ Hub forum](#) was held at the University of Cumbria. The event, led by the Place Collective in collaboration with the Centre for National Parks and Protected Areas, focused on land use, landscapes, livelihoods and cultures in the UK's uplands and protected landscapes.

Several members of the [Rapid Engagement with Stressed Peatland Environments and Communities in Transformation](#) (RESPECT) project attended to learn more about opportunities and challenges around changes in land management. In this article, three members of the RESPECT project give their reflections on the event and the role of peatland in helping the UK land use sector reach net zero by 2050.



Ada Shaw: “At the unruly edges, I found the conversations I was looking for”

Anna Tsing, in considering life in the ruins of capitalism, says:

“Consider, indeed, the question of what’s left. Given the effectiveness of state and capitalist devastation of natural landscapes, we might ask why anything outside their plans is alive today. To address this, we will need to watch unruly edges.”

What most struck me at the *Resonance: “Uplands and Protected Landscapes”* event in the Lake District was the window it provided into the unruly edges of the UK's land and restoration world. I was on the lookout for edges that might prove useful to understanding our own project of peatland restoration. Specifically, in-line with my own previous anthropological research in human-earth relationships, I was wondering how topics of

people and nature might come up. Would these two things be firmly divided or would there be a crossover, an acknowledgement of people and nature's mutual interdependence, perhaps a challenge to the idea that people and nature are two separate things at all?

At the unruly edges I found the conversations I was looking for, and ideas for moving towards a more integrated human-nature continuum. I listened to stories from cousins who had started a community forest in the south of the Lake District over 20 years ago, I met a former corporate lawyer who recently moved to a farm on the West Coast of England and was learning how to truly come to know his land, and I learned that there are still, in fact, commons in England. These are all, in their own ways, evidence of edges that have provided (or retained, as in the case of the commons) reciprocal and mutually-knowing relationships between "people and nature".

Life in the Anthropocene and the ruins of capitalism will require much of us, but it was nice to meet people who know this, reminding me that there are still communities and landscapes that are alive, together, today.

Wenguang Tang: "I feel inspired and eager to continue my work in this important area"

I was thrilled to attend the conference in the beautiful location of Ambleside. It was a great chance for me to discuss UK land use with a diverse group of participants, such as farmland owners, policymakers, research scientists and land managers. By joining the land use and protection sessions, I learned more about land use and nature restoration. I was particularly excited to hear that many successful land restoration projects have been carried out in the UK.

It was a fruitful conference for me. As a terrestrial ecologist focused on peatland carbon sequestration, I also saw some insightful studies about UK peatland restoration, carbon sequestration and greenhouse gas emissions. I learned that peatlands play an important role in storing carbon and drinking water, but that these roles have been challenged by climate change and human activities.

I also discussed and built connections with stakeholders such as Ian Crosher from Natural England, who shared a recent report on climate mitigation and peatland in England. Overall, the conference was incredibly productive for me, and I feel inspired and eager to continue my work in this important area.

Miranda Geelhoed: "The very idea of land use was poetically and powerfully challenged from the outset"

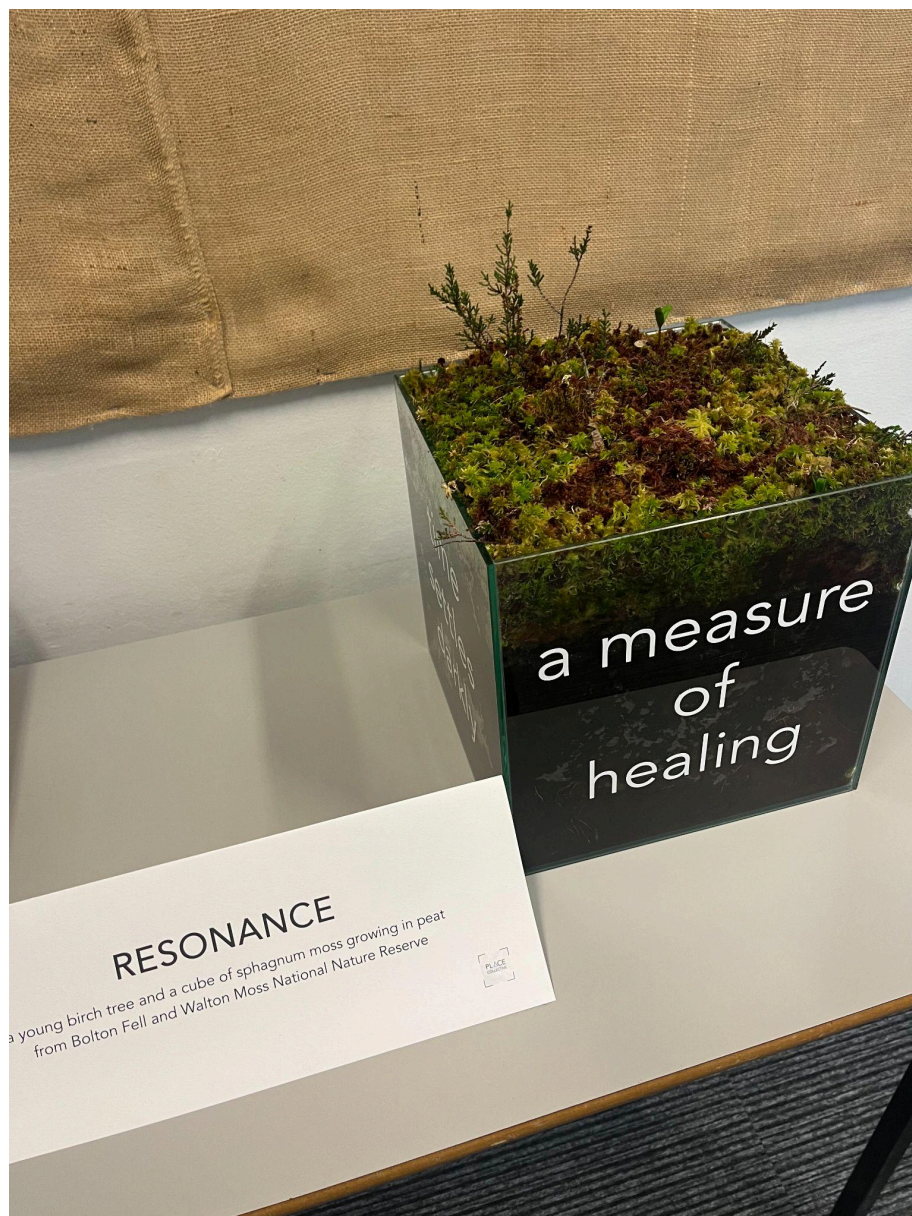
Sunshine in Cumbria is not guaranteed, and while hail and rain showers made their presence known, we were fortunate to enjoy many bright intervals during the event. Blending into the stunning landscape through architecture inspired by traditional Lake District styles, the University of Cumbria provided the perfect backdrop for a conversation around place, local economies, communities and land use (change). Although, it must be said that the very idea of land *use* was poetically and powerfully challenged from the outset, for should the question be what the land can do for us or what we can do for the land?

From the perspective of policy and governance, a few themes emerged. Firstly, the role of law in addressing or worsening imbalances in power to make decisions about land (use). Secondly, and related to the previous point, the role of (rural) communities and the need for support to nurture and shape *cultural* landscapes. Lastly, the importance of stable and reliable sources of public/private/blended finance to support land use transitions and collaborative approaches.

It was largely agreed that data capture and generation is key to delivering and distributing public funds in an efficient way. However, unrealistic baselining, monitoring and evaluation requirements were also flagged as barriers to making projects happen, particularly when involving complex collaborations and under-resourced groups (such as small farms, commoners and community groups).

Workshops were built around existing success stories including the [Farming in Protected Landscapes](#) scheme. This scheme seems to have been successful in bridging perceived gaps between farming and the environment, reinforcing the position of those with strong (historical or cultural) ties within natural surroundings and protecting more vulnerable farms against economic/funding fluctuations – learning we can bring back to the Scottish context.

Similarly, Scottish experiences with directly linking policy strategies on land use (change) to responsibilities of landowners and rights of communities should be integrated into current English policy debates. This is a point RESPECT will highlight in its response to the [Land Use Framework consultation](#).



More about the RESPECT project

Rapid Engagement with Stressed Peatland Environments and Communities in Transformation (RESPECT) is one of five separate transdisciplinary research projects funded alongside the LUNZ Hub. RESPECT is carrying out cutting-edge research on peatland restoration in the UK and will develop tools to help farmers, crofters and land managers make effective peatland restoration decisions, while also suggesting a suite of practical policy changes to better support sustainable land management.



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