

## Richard Leafe CEO, Lake District National Park Authority

### Background Facts

The Lake District National Park covers 2,292 square miles

An estimated 16 million people will visit the Lake District in the year 2014

The Lake District National Park Authority owns five Commons (Caldale, Uldale, Barf, Glenridding & Blawith), and leases from the crown state Torver High, Torver Back and Tover Low Commons.

Richard Leafe has been CEO since 2007. He came to the role after being regional director for Natural England.

We meet Richard in his office at the Lake District National Park Authority headquarters in Kendal. Light floods in through the many windows, and we sit at one of the tables to talk.

In his late forties, with short, tan-brown hair, Richard has a youthful, fresh faced look and the physique of an outdoor enthusiast.

‘Like you, I share a passion for this place,’ he says, when we ask what inspires him. ‘I came on a field trip to the Lake District when I was a geography student and was blown away by the scale of the landscape and the mountains. I love it. My thing is walking, climbing, running, cycling. I do that all over the National Park.’

Fired by this passion to do what he can to preserve a region that inspires so many, Richard is in the driving seat for the biggest national park in England. It’s a challenging role that demands attention to many different aspects of the park, including housing, the environment, tourism, industry and farming.

The Lake District National Park (LDNPA) is committed to supporting the unique system of farming in the national park where much of the farming takes place on upland commons. Here sheep from a number of farmers or graziers may roam, following their own ‘hefts’ or traditional grazing patterns. It’s a system of collective management that has been in place for centuries, and since Tudor times government legislation has served to protect both the environment and the commoners.

The LDNPA owns several commons, so it has the role of land owner and the wider role of park protector. As CEO, Richard needs to wear both hats, and keep in touch with the many different organisations that are also involved in ownership and care of the land. The LDNPA coordinates a partnership of 24 organisations; and all work towards the single vision that the park should be an ‘inspirational example of sustainable development in action, with a prosperous economy, vibrant communities, world class visitor experiences, and a spectacular landscape.’ In all of these areas, farming plays a central role: the economy of agriculture; the communities (especially in some of the outlying valleys); tourism; and landscape care.

In addition to this partnership between many organisations, Richard is involved in the Farming & Forestry (F&F) Task Group, whose objective is to facilitate communication between farmers and policy makers. And he oversees a number of LDNPA rangers who are ‘at the front line’ of the

authority's work. Pete Barron, for instance, who we met on the shores of Bassenthwaite, is not only in touch with farmers about commons agreements, stewardship schemes, access or fencing issues, he also keeps on top of fishing issues, parish council concerns, lake management, monitoring climate change, an osprey project and property care. While Richard's role is not to be on the front line as the rangers are, he does try to get involved at the grass roots – in 2012 he accepted an invitation from James Rebanks to judge at Patterdale Show.

'I had a great time, but no, I have no idea what makes a good sheep and what makes a bad sheep! I'm no expert on sheep, but I'm pleased to have the opportunity to interact with the farming community at a sheep show.'

When Richard came to the post of CEO in 2007, he didn't follow in his predecessors' footsteps. 'In the past,' he says, 'the National Park officer (as the title was known) was seen as an out-and-out supporter of the hill farming community – that was part of the job. Then I came along and I've got a different take on it. I try to look at it in terms of a contribution to society as a whole; the National Park is here to provide for people. That leads me to have a slightly different view on some of the values of hill farming.'

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'I start from the point of view that the way the landscape has been managed in the National Park has evolved over a period of time, and it hasn't always been as dominated as it is now by sheep farming. We need grazing animals to manage the mosaic of vegetation and get the best from a biodiversity point of view, as well as producing food. But a simplistic association is often made that because the landscape has been farmed, the farmers are the custodians of everything we see, and everything they do is positive for the environment. The relationship is more complicated than that: there are pluses and minuses to the effects of farming. Our job is to try and get the balance right.'

'I'm in the business of saving the upland hill farmer; but I think the way of doing that is by getting society in general to value *all* of the services that upland management produces, and not just one (which is meat or livestock). Going way back in time, hill farming has never been an economic activity in its own right. It has always diversified to a degree.

'I think in the future other elements are going to be just as important as income sources as the subsidies are now.' He talks of water quality, access for visitors, biodiversity, and carbon. Of carbon he adds: 'In a nutshell you can only really trade trees on a carbon market at the moment, not peat, but it's moving that way: peat is close to being accredited in the same way that trees are. That opens up potentially big money for the farming industry.'

What Richard is talking about when he refers to the carbon industry is a hot topic among land managers and environmentalists: 'ecosystem services' is one way of evaluating what the land provides. And one aspect of this is biodiversity, something that is close to Richard's heart (with a background in Geography and a previous career with Natural England). 'I'm often struck by the lack of diversity of plant and animal life when I go walking in the fells. You don't often see much wildlife and yet you're in the biggest national park in England. There's something not right about that for me.

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'We know that the wildlife this park should host should be better than it is. The main way we're starting to rectify that is by controlling grazing and fencing, that sort of thing, to reintroduce tree cover and diversity back into our landscape.

The issue of reducing grazing is something that is frequently talked about among farmers. When a group of commoners enter an agreement with Natural England, they need to adhere to specific stocking levels. For some of them, there is no requirement to reduce stock, but on most commons, sheep numbers are being reduced, with the aim of improving the condition of the land and boosting biodiversity. Some farmers find that the reductions work well for them; others say it presents a threat to their traditional practices and even the viability of their flocks. We ask Richard for his view. 'When sheep numbers were increased to their very high levels,' he says, referring to the headage scheme where each individual farmer received a payment per sheep, 'that had detrimental impacts on biodiversity and on water quality and quantity, and on the ability of vegetation to store carbon. The park's natural environment doesn't perform as well as it might if it had the natural balance that was in place before the common agricultural policies provided that perverse incentive to the farming industry to over-stock.'

Most farmers agree with this last point whole heartedly, that when sheep numbers get too high, this isn't good for the land or the sheep. But many are fearful that drastic reductions in stocking numbers, combined with an obligation to take sheep off the fells for winter (up to six months of the year), will reduce their hardiness and their resistance to disease, and undermine the hefting instinct that is vital to their survival on the high commons.

Richard's position is to take the wide view and play his part in shaping policies that hold the promise to protect the land and its agricultural industry into the future, sustainably. 'It is a tough decision for the farmers,' he rightly says. 'But I think it's worth remembering that over the course of the next ten years we're going to be spending a hundred million pounds on agri-environment measures alone in this national park. We have to be able to demonstrate that we're getting value for money for the services we get from the land. We can quantify it in terms of food production (meat); we can quantify it in terms of landscape management, looking after the vernacular buildings, properties and walls; and we can value it in terms of biodiversity, access, and carbon. What I need is the farming community to work with us on that journey.'

In response to Richard, I ask about the value of the unique culture of hill farming here in Cumbria, and the fact that the Lake District is a living landscape, a hand-made, farmed land, rather than a wild place or a playground. He acknowledges the cultural value, and is a strong supporter of the current bid to establish the Lake District National Park as a World Heritage Site. 'It is one of the policies of the partnership and we remain committed to seeing if we can get World Heritage Status,' says Richard. 'We've got people like James Rebanks, who farms in Matteredale. He went to university in Oxford and is doing research for us on the economic value of the world heritage site, yet he's there helping his dad out, showing sheep, and he's very proud.'

Promotion of the cultural value of upland farming in Cumbria is one of the many elements that the National Park Authority needs to accommodate, and protect, and Richard receives pressure from many angles. The farmers ask, "How low can we go in terms of sheep numbers before our viability is threatened?" I also have to consider the priorities of government and the water companies, who want to see value for money in terms of tax payers' investments.'

'My job is to find the sweet spot in the middle; to ensure we've got a productive and healthy farming industry that is in balance with the natural environment, and that we have more biodiversity because that's a good thing in general, and it's a good thing economically.'

'And you know,' he continues, referring to his time at the show in Patterdale, 'there's no better place than the bar of a sheep show to explore these things.'

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