



Our changing world: RS interview with Alastair McIntosh

To start this feature, Alastair McIntosh talks about change.

The theme of this issue is 'Our changing world'. What is the most important change you've been aware of in the last 30 years?

Well, 30 years ago, those who were environmentally conscious were moving into top gear after the June 1992 Earth Summit at Rio. Formally, that is to say, the UN's Conference on Environment and Development. It sowed a lot of seeds. They included

Outer Hebrides, 2015, looking north from North Uist towards the Isle of Harris and Roineabhal, the mountain once threatened by a superquarry. Photo: Véréne Nicolas.

the Biodiversity Convention, the opening sentence of which gave important framing, and note the very first word: "*Conscious* of the intrinsic value of biological diversity and of the ecological, genetic, social, economic, scientific, educational, cultural, recreational and aesthetic values of biological diversity and its components...."

Rio's accompanying principles of Forest Management adds that forests "should be examined in a holistic and balanced manner". But most significant for the past three decades, was its establishment of the UN's

Framework Convention on Climate Change. This shifted climate change from the laboratory to the political arena, and the meetings of world governments such as COP26 in Glasgow in 2021.

Another Rio outcome was Agenda 21, a blueprint for action for the 21st century. I remember some of our students at the Centre for Human Ecology, then in Edinburgh University, found work with Local Agenda 21 via local authorities. Back then there was more hope in the air. The 1990s were a little like the countercultural 1960s, and that

Woodstock lyric: “We are stardust/ we are golden/ And we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.” But today, we must be diggers *as well as* dreamers.

The word dùthchas describes the idea of unity existing between land, people, all living creatures, nature and culture. How can we push dùthchas into the Scottish mainstream?

I beg your pardon! It *is* a mainstream position in our indigenous culture. This is the urgency of recovering an indigeneity that can be inclusive of all who are willing to respect, listen and learn. We see it in the foliated knotwork and animal totemism of our Pictish stone carvings and medieval manuscripts. It is in our ethnography and folklore, for example, in the *Carmina Gadelica*—six volumes of people-and-nature embedded spiritual magnificence collected in the Hebrides in the 19th century. It is in the place names and “the implicit meanings of local practices” on both land and sea. It is in the Gaelic Psalms, the teaching stories of the Celtic saints and shamanistic tales like Sweeney Astray. It is in the archaeology and in the Gaelic sacred tree names and alphabet. It is in the lore of ‘faerie’ that—once you penetrate beyond the seemingly ridiculous—encodes the spiritual in nature; and that, as the source of so much music, poetry and song, rises up as currents of the “carrying stream”, in Jungian terms, or the cultural unconscious. Let’s be immersed in that; and teach and open up anew blocked wellsprings. These are our *dùthchas*.

What worries you most about the future?

The consequences of arrogance, of bombast, of egotism. As Rudyard Kipling, a son of the one of the Macdonald sisters with roots in Skye, recognised in *Pook*: anything that frightens off the faeries!

Why? Because hubris lies at the roots of both climate change and war. I have written two books on climate

The Callanish Stones are situated on a low ridge above the waters of Loch Roag, on the west coast of Lewis, across the water from Great Bernera. Photo: Alastair McIntosh.

change, most recently in 2020, *Riders on the Storm*. As in all my books and especially *Soil and Soul* (2001) and *Poacher’s Pilgrimage* (2016), my underlying aim is to draw out the depth psychology and spirituality of our times. That is what makes me tick: the human condition and how to deepen it. We cannot tackle climate change, ecocide, poverty and war only as if “out there” in the realms of politics, economics, science and technology. Their root lies “in here”; and that is why the garden we must tend must be with love.

Many terms, such as sustainability and rewilding, have moved from the ‘green’ fringes into the mainstream. However, sustainability rarely considers the next generation let alone seven generations hence, and rewilding has transformed from a slow, regenerative process into a ‘carbonanza’, where landscapes are altered on the back of premature

carbon calculations. Do you think there is a place for carbon credits as an economic driver for rural land use in Scotland? If not, how would you pay for nature recovery or rewilding to be undertaken right across the country?

How would I pay? Well, communities of place that can grow in right relationships to nationhood, as community writ large, can only be recovered by *re-membering* what has been dismembered, *re-visioning* a future that gives life, and *re-claiming* what it takes to ground that dream into being. So, I would tax unaccountable private land ownership though land value taxation, and use the proceeds to finance community buyouts. Unless they serve community in ways that local communities want, get the lairds to finance their own clearance! That sort of tenor of political policies.





As for sustainable development, I am all for it as true development. The etymology is *de-enveloper*, to unfold the envelope of human potential. It cannot be another guise for capitalism. It has got to be replete with soul. That is just one of several reasons why I question carbon colonisation. And there is no soul unless “real people in a real place” as Iain Crichton Smith put it, have *agency*. Agency means real power and influence. It means being the subjects and not the objects of your own existence. Only a community has the right to choose its future. Anything less, is just more colonisation of both lands and minds. To colonise is to take what does not belong.

Sheiling ruins in the parish of Lochs, Lewis—Alastair’s home area. Photo: Alastair McIntosh.

In contrast, to get a life worth having demands the work of love. Such is full humanisation. That is thrilling. It is why, even as the fan hits the compost heap, I don’t despair. As the Haudenosaunee Six Nations of the Iroquois put it to the United Nations in 1977: this is “a basic call to consciousness”.

If you could have your time again, would you focus your attention and efforts differently?

I’ll be 68 in November, and as I look back on my life, you know, nothing was wasted. Even things that hurt at the time. All was and is a part of the all. I feel ... gratitude! My focus was a journey of discovery.

In your 76-page discussion paper, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Carbon, you propose a new set of standards for thinking about the inclusion of local communities as active partners and participants in landownership. But is there a tension between ecological restoration and what rural people actually want and need, and was the recent debacle over proposed Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs) a manifestation of this?

What both ‘rewilding’ and HPMAs have had in common, is that too often they were parachuted in to communities of place rather than emerging from them. Let me pop a question. Why did the movement for ‘reforesting’ Scotland not provoke a grassroots reaction in the same way as ‘rewilding’ has done? Largely, because it emerged organically from communities. Early issues of this magazine advanced not just treeplanting “the Galaxy”, but the social agenda too of land reform. Neither was it as a local versus incomer issue. Remember, Bernard Planterose who was principal editor of the *Tree Planters’ Guide to the Galaxy*, where Reforesting Scotland began, was very much an incomer. But you see, he came to give and not just take. To listen, and to share the view and not just to buy it; and certainly not to flog off the carbon under a community’s feet, with legally binding “permanent” land use implications for future generations.

My paper outlines what I call the Olympic Framework of land tenure. The Bronze Standard—of conventional landlordism where communities have just their legal rights. The Gold Standard—of full community landholding. And what I have suggested is an additional middle way of the Silver Standard. This is where a community of place, through its accountable local structures, draws up a Memorandum of Understanding with an incoming private landowner. The aim should be a win-win set of outcomes, and these might be a stepping stone towards a future Gold Standard.

For example, a Silver Standard outcome—what Community Land Scotland are provisionally calling a Thriving Community Partnership—

could and should include assurances on security of tenancies, rural housing burdens to prevent future change of use to holiday homes or lets, right-to-buy at economic valuation land that is important to the community's development, and democratically accountable representation on a local management board. An example is what Jeremy Leggett of Highlands Rewilding agreed in May 2023 with the Tayvallich Initiative in Argyll. I saw that process close up as it unfolded, and hope that it will prove to be a pattern and example of win-win.

Such is how communities can re-indigenise, and in ways that include both the native and the incomer. I have a poem called *Scotland*: "A person belongs/ inasmuch as they are willing/ to cherish and be cherished/ by this place/ and its peoples." There you have it. The natural ecology and the human ecology, walking hand-in-hand, but notice it is the cherishing that makes it happen.

Below: Lewis is steeped in spiritual history, from standing stones to coastal "temples" like Teampall Mhicheil, St Michael's, on Little Berenera. Photo: Alastair McIntosh.

What changes have encouraged you most over the past 30 years?

Well, to take just one example, Reforesting Scotland has survived and thrived—the Journal and the organisation. As that UN statement said, we need to look on forests "in a holistic and balanced manner". How come? Well, just look at the magazine that's in your hands! It is practical. It is human. It is ecological. And above all, it is beautiful. I'm with Dostoevsky. "Beauty will save the world."

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Alastair McIntosh is a writer, environmental campaigner and pioneer of modern land reform in Scotland.

Right: One of the Callanish VIII stones on the island of Great Bernera, in Loch Roag on the north-west coast of Lewis; this standing stone arrangement is very unusual (and possibly unique) as it is laid out in a semicircle. Photo: Alastair McIntosh.

