



The potential for collaborative agri-environment schemes in England: Can a well-designed collaborative approach address farmers' concerns with current schemes?

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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:
Cooperation
Agri-environment
Timeliness
Independence
Farmers
Collaboration

There is increasing recognition that whilst agri-environment schemes in England have had discernable benefits, their success in relation to certain species and resources has been inhibited by the piecemeal implementation of Environmental Stewardship (ES) on the basis of single farm agreements. In this paper we examine the receptivity of farmers to the idea of landscape-scale, collaborative agri-environment schemes (cAES) based on semi-structured interviewing in three English case-study areas. Using qualitative sociocultural interpretation we argue that a lack of communication and mutual understanding between farmers; a cultural imperative for independence and timeliness, and; alternative interpretations of risk amongst farmers present potential barriers to cAES. We also argue, however, that if designed appropriately, cAES have the potential to overcome certain concerns that farmers hold about the existing ES schemes. In particular, cAES are likely to gain support from farmers where they are seen to offer greater flexibility; scope for farmer involvement in scheme design; locally targeted and clearly defined aims, and; demonstrable benefits that can be monitored as a record of success. We provide policy recommendations and suggest that cAES have the potential to deliver greater environmental benefits, whilst at the same time encouraging farmers' participation in, and satisfaction with, agri-environment schemes.

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1. Introduction

In June 2011 the English Government launched its Natural Environment White Paper: 'The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature'. The White Paper places emphasis on protecting and improving the natural environment, growing a green economy and reconnecting people and nature. It advocates 'joined-up action at local and national levels to create an ecological *network* which is resilient to changing pressures' (HM Government, 2011:14, emphasis added). The concept of the ecological network is adopted from Lawton et al.'s 'Making Space for Nature' (2010), which posited 24 recommendations to government to enhance and protect the natural environment under the guiding principles of 'more', 'bigger', 'better' and 'joined'. They define an ecological network as:

A suite of high quality sites which collectively contain the diversity and area of habitat that are needed to support species

and which have ecological connections between them that enable species, or at least their genes, to move (Lawton et al., 2010: iv).

Central to the recommendations related to the improvement of ecological networks is the concept of landscape-scale management (also Webb et al., 2010), which aims to address habitat fragmentation and to enhance the resilience of England's priority species by making management intervention over a large geographic area (HM Government, 2011: 18).

Whilst a landscape-scale approach necessitates integrated management across a range of sectors and stakeholders, a successful intervention will necessarily incorporate agricultural land and require the involvement of farmers (Natural England, 2011). In England, as with the rest of the European Union, farmland conservation is administered and encouraged via Agri-Environment Schemes (AES). The current system of AES in England is administered through a two-tier Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ES). The Entry Level Stewardship Scheme (ELS) is accessible to all farmers and pays a flat rate of £30/ha for meeting a range of management options that are allocated using points and calculated across the entire farm holding. The ELS is described as a 'broad and shallow' scheme, which aims to implement basic

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conservation measures across a large part of the farmed landscape. Currently, more than 60% of the farmed land in England is within an ELS agreement. ELS agreements last for five years and the scheme includes variations tailored to organic and upland farming. The upper tier of ES is known as Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) and provides additional financial support for more demanding conservation intervention in targeted high value areas. Unlike the ELS, the HLS is a discretionary scheme with the government's conservation advisory agency – Natural England – deciding which applications to fund. The HLS agreement involves a greater degree of negotiation between advisor and farmer, offers a much wider range of management options, does not necessarily apply to the entire farm holding and is agreed over a 10 year period.¹

There are current provisions within the HLS and the upland version of ELS that provide a financial supplement for applications from groups. These provisions, however, have been principally designed to facilitate applications on common land, rather than to address landscape scale environmental issues *per se* (Franks et al., 2011). Outside of this small number of cases the vast majority of stewardship agreements are implemented on an individual farm holding. If the government's objectives for enhanced ecological networks are to be achieved, however, and if agri-environment schemes are to be one of the principal means of delivering a landscape-scale approach, then it seems very likely that collaborative Agri-Environment Schemes (cAES) will be extended to incorporate farmland and farmers that have hitherto entered into AES on an individual basis, or, perhaps, that have not entered AES at all. Given this scenario, and given British farmers' general reluctance to cooperate beyond informal reciprocal relations (Davies et al., 2004; Mills et al., 2006), the purpose of this paper is to examine and report on farmers' receptivity to the idea of cAES and to identify the potential barriers and opportunities for the more widespread implementation of such schemes. It is not our purpose here to explore and elaborate specific landscape-scale approaches (but see Goldman et al., 2007). Each approach will be tailored to its particular geographic location and present its own opportunities and drawbacks. Our purpose here, rather, is to provide a first look at farmers' views on the potential for cAES and to understand this in terms of their existing views on working with other farmers and on participation in AES. In doing so, and by adopting a principally sociocultural approach to interpretation, we also aim to make a broader theoretical contribution to debates regarding the cultural, normative, value-based and symbolic influences on farmers' behaviour in relation to agri-environmental and wider conservation practices (Burton, 2004a; Burton et al., 2008; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; Emery, 2010; Gravsholt-Busck, 2002; Setten, 2004; Siebert et al., 2006; Silvasti, 2003).

Rather than viewing cAES as presenting a range of additional barriers to AES participation over and above current AES, we consider whether cAES can actually overcome some of the problems that farmers have with current AES, encourage further participation and favourability towards AES, whilst at the same time achieving greater environmental benefits. The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 outlines the methodology of the research; Section 3 briefly outlines the ecological rationale for a landscape-scale approach and previous experience of environmental collaboration between farmers; Section 4 presents the main results and discussion, whilst Section 5 draws conclusions and provides recommendations.

2. Methods

The findings presented in this paper are based on semi-structured interviews with 33 English farmers in three separate case study areas. The interviews were conducted in January and February 2011. The approach to interviewing included quantifiable elements, as well as more open-ended discussion topics that could be analysed qualitatively. This approach ensured that information on various structural variables (such as farm size and type) was consistently collected, whilst also providing scope for an unrestricted and fluid discussion of the key topics following the principles of active interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

The interviews included the following elements: i) background information about the farm and the farmer; ii) existing cooperation and views on cooperation; iii) existing AES involvement and views about the schemes; iv) 'in principle' favourability to the idea of cAES; v) favourability to a series of hypothetical landscape-scale AES with different management requirements; vi) broader views on the merits, drawback and constraints of cAES, and; vii) conceptions of 'good farming', to give an indication of potential cultural influences on decision-making (Burton, 2004a; Silvasti, 2003).

In addition to the semi-structured interview, each interviewee was asked to provide likert-type scores against a series of different behaviours based on the principles of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). The TPB was not used to test the theory itself and nor was it thoroughly applied to allow statistical testing of respondents' likely future behaviours. Instead, the *principles* of the theory were applied as an alternative way of eliciting responses to the same issues that were discussed during the interviews using an established theory (see Beedell and Rehman, 1999 for the basic elements of the theory). On this basis, and against five different behaviours, each respondent was asked to score (from 1–7) their favourability towards behaviour *x* (indicating attitude); difficulty and level of personal control for them to do behaviour *x* (indicating perceived behavioural control); how favourable other farmers are towards behaviour *x* and the extent to which other farmers' views matter to oneself (indicating subjective norm) and intention to do behaviour *x* (indicating intent). Scores were elicited against five potential behaviours, namely: i) cooperating with other farmers; ii) undertaking environmental work outside of AES; iii) participating in ELS iv) participating in HLS, and finally; v) participating in a cAES.

The quantifiable data was collated in a spreadsheet, whilst the interviews were transcribed and coded. Our interpretation follows what is best described as a sociocultural approach in acknowledgement of its anthropological underpinnings. Modern sociocultural anthropology arose out of the merging/interpenetration of the traditional disciplines of social anthropology and cultural anthropology and incorporates analysis of the cultural, normative, value-based and symbolic influences on human behaviour, as well as the distinctive features of social organisation in and through which such behaviours permeate. Our interpretation might be better referred to as what Geertz (1973) has famously called "thick description", in that it interprets what farmers say, do or imply through the lens of a deeper understanding of the sociocultural milieu in which they operate, as informed by the author's own long-term ethnographic fieldwork amongst English farmers (Emery, 2010) and a growing body of similarly grounded research. As noted, the Theory of Planned Behaviour is employed here as an additional means of eliciting responses, rather than as a theoretical framework and analytic tool *per se*. Nevertheless, sociocultural insights were used to inform this elicitation tool and, whilst not our purpose here, efforts have been made elsewhere to more strongly integrate cultural factors into the more typically psychological Theory of Planned Behaviour (Burton, 2004b).

¹ Further details about Environmental Stewardship are available at www.naturalengland.org.uk.

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