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Is it really about the trees? Exploring the roots of resistance to tree-planting on the Welsh commons

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ABSTRACT

The UK governments have set ambitious targets for tree-planting as part of their commitments to address climate breakdown and biodiversity loss. Meeting these targets requires the cooperation of farmers, including those farming on common land. The complexity of farmers' concerns about planting trees, coupled with the specific socio-cultural context of the commons, presents challenges. This interpretative essay begins with an exploration of commoning as culture, conceptualising the commons and how they are contested, before exploring the dynamics of change and stasis. It then narrows its lens to focus on the history of the Welsh commons, identifying a centuries-long struggle for survival against exploitation, displacement and commodification, a struggle extending into the present as new external forces press upon the commons. The arguments are illustrated with a case study on two Welsh upland commons, sites of contestation over woodland creation. This place-based study within the broader discussion reveals a powerful insider/outsider dichotomy and a determined resistance to any force external to the commons. We identify potential for positive change, perhaps on a case-by-case basis, if the 'pluriversal' values of commoning could rise to prominence over normative neoliberal concepts. Ultimately, the contestation in Wales is not really about the trees.

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1. Introduction

Tree cover in the UK is relatively sparse in comparison to other European nations (Forest Research, 2023). Accordingly, ambitious targets have been set for tree planting within the four nations of the UK, with a deadline of 2030 (Confor, 2024; IWA, 2022; Jowitt & Tubby, 2024). These targets form part of national biodiversity and net zero commitments. With agricultural land accounting for approximately 68% of land in England, 90% in Wales, 80% in Scotland and 74% in Northern Ireland (Brand, 2021; DAERA, 2022; DEFRA, 2024; Welsh Government, 2023), it is clear that there is an urgent need

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for 'the vast majority of farmers' (Staddon et al., 2021, p. 90) to increase tree cover on their farms. However, although the benefits of trees to farms and farmers are increasingly understood whether as part of an agroforestry scheme (Quandt et al., 2023) or more generally (Binner et al., 2018; Downey et al., 2025), the promotion of tree planting on farmed land has long been and continues to be problematic (Farming UK, 2023; Hardaker et al., 2022; Westaway et al., 2023) and progress towards targets is too slow (Downey et al., 2025; Felton et al., 2023).

Among the UK's four nations, Wales has the widest gap between tree-planting targets and actual progress (Westaway et al., 2023). It also has the highest percentage of land in agricultural use, a total just short of 1,595,000 hectares (Stats Wales, 2019). As the Welsh Government's target is to cover 180,000 hectares of land with 300 million trees (IWA, 2022), this means a target for on-farm planting of around 162,000 hectares. With pre-science born of experience, in 2022, the Institute for Welsh Affairs (IWA, 2022) warned that attracting the necessary 'farmer and community participation' in tree-planting would be 'a massive challenge'. As predicted, in July 2023, the Welsh Farmers' Union (NFU Cymru) announced members' refusal to participate in a proposed Sustainable Farming Scheme whereby eligibility for subsidies required all farmers to plant trees on 10% of their land (Farming UK, 2023). This has led to a revised Sustainable Farming Scheme (Welsh Government, 2025), to be launched in January 2026, which requires all farmers accessing the scheme to submit a 'planting opportunity plan'. They can then access 'optional' funding to implement their plan and are expected to show progress, with a minimum requirement of planting 250 trees by the end of 2028.

This paper is an interpretative essay bringing the specific tree-planting question into a wider discussion of farmers, the commons and cultures of commoning in Wales, and potentially beyond. Although there are numerous studies of agri-environmental or tree-planting projects on farmland in Wales (Beauchamp & Jenkins, 2020; Mills et al., 2011; Verfuerth et al., 2023; Wynne-Jones, 2012), few consider projects on common land. Common land ownership and commoning as a culture add specific challenges to the tree planting agenda (Mills et al., 2011). In order to bring sharply into focus some of the barriers to and possible opportunities for tree-planting on UK agricultural land, this essay narrows the angle of its lens specifically onto Wales and onto Welsh common land, which accounts for 8.5% of Wales' total land area (Laimann, 2018; NFU Cymru, 2022). 75% of Welsh commons are upland areas used predominantly by hill-farmers for grazing (Foundation for Common Land, 2025; NFU Cymru, 2022). The topography is mostly open moorland with areas of grass, heather, scrub, small copses of trees and an increasing coverage of bracken due to reduced grazing, particularly of cattle. If commons are to play a proportional role in meeting government targets, approximately 14,913 ha of Welsh common land will need to be planted with trees. The new SFS explicitly supports graziers to access the universal payment in relation to their common rights; they will also be expected to plant trees by the end of 2028 (Welsh Government, 2025). In this context, this essay aims to bring sharply into focus some of the barriers to and possible opportunities for tree-planting on UK agricultural land, narrowing the angle of its lens onto Welsh common land. It achieves this by interpreting a range of literature (both academic and grey), policy documents, and a small case study including interviews with land managers.

The essay begins with a consideration of theories relating to commoning as a culture, before moving on to explore conceptualisation of the commons and how they have been

and continue to be contested. Turning its attention specifically to Wales, the essay then provides a brief history of the evolution and continued struggle for survival of Welsh commons and commoning, followed by a consideration of issues relating to conservation and the deforestation/reforestation of the Welsh commons. To contextualise and illustrate these contestations, the essay then draws upon empirical data generated by a case study conducted on two commons in South East Wales in 2023 where graziers were resistant and even hostile to the plans of a local woodland creation charity to plant trees on both private farmland and common land. The study offers insights into the enduring impact of history, culture and sense of place on commoning communities. This is essentially a tentative interpretation which might, through its narrow focus, contribute to a deeper understanding of barriers to increasing tree cover on Welsh agricultural land and more widely in the UK, and may identify opportunities for harnessing the spirit of the commons to work towards transformational change.

2. Commoning as culture

2.1. Conceptualising the commons

The question of 'the commons' is very much a discussion for our times. Normative understandings of 'the commons' conceptualise them as a geographical space. However, it is helpful to understand that contemporary discourse extends the concept of 'the commons' beyond the geographical/ecological commons to encompass other tangibles such as seeds (Shiva, 2022), and intangibles such as genetic inheritance, human fertility, culture and even outer-space or the future (Brigstocke, 2016; Linebaugh, 2014). All of these are contested spaces or resources in which neoliberalism's hegemonic emphasis on individualism and competition leads to attempts to commodify and exploit common resources or common goods, attempts which are resisted by movements or individuals. The latter of these might be what Blencowe (2016, p. 186) refers to as 'the spirit of the commons' which, he claims, is 'most obviously manifest in the common farming of common land'. This combination of the 'spirit of the commons' and 'common farming of common land' (ibid) merits attention.

Returning to the commons as a geographically-situated physical resource, two seminal texts exploring management of common land embody the two conflicting paradigms of competitive individualism and collaborative communalism. Hardin (1968) and Ostrom (1990) both conceptualise the commons as a shared resource but argue for completely different models of human social behaviour in relation to management of the resource. Hardin's 'Tragedy of the Commons' (1968) asserts that humans are rationally-driven with a self-interested instinct to exploit common land for individual gain; successful management of a common resource therefore requires an external authority. However, this misanthropic argument was convincingly debunked by Ostrom's Nobel Prize-winning research (Ostrom, 1990) which explores numerous global examples of communities working together to manage a common resource for mutual benefit in shared practices of commoning. We see here a contrast between dependence on external authority on one hand, and self-regulation within a community on the other.

Following Ostrom, the commons need not be conceptualised as either a physical or an intangible space, but as a social construct, a series of normative practices for which the

verb 'commoning' serves well. Matthews (2016, p. 76) defines commoning as 'the ongoing relations that constitute lives lived in common', with Bresnihan (2016, p. 100) adding that these relations are based on 'a concept of care' rather than individualism, recognising a 'complex network of interdependencies'. Co-existing with others and with nature, even when based on centuries of co-created knowledge, needs dynamic practices based on trust and a shared ethos of reciprocity to navigate unpredictable internal and external factors (Bresnihan, 2016; Kirwan et al., 2016; Ostrom et al., 2012). Ostrom (1990) observes that the shared norms of a localised setting are most conducive to this; a Welsh common might be a good example. Bresnihan (2016) builds on Ostrom to argue that reciprocity rather than rules will govern the use of a resource if everybody's shared future depends upon its sustainability, but commoning's fragility is exposed when external actors are introduced who may not suffer the consequences of unjust practices, or who might extract resources from the community.

Contradicting Hardin's argument, numerous studies have revealed examples of commoning practices collapsing under top-down systems of governance and regulation, or the introduction of neoliberal individualism and competition (Dietz et al., 2003; Matthews, 2016; Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2001). Describing her childhood in a German village, Mies (Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2001, p. 998) recalls the 'great fun' of the communal labour in which every household participated. Now, she writes, the land has been privatised, communal replaced by waged labour, and the community weakened. As she observes, instincts of cooperation, rooted in centuries of knowledge and tradition, or what Singh (2015) calls 'the gift paradigm', can soon be destroyed by 'hegemonic acceptance of self-interest as a motive'. The fragility of commoning in the twenty first century is clear, but so are its value and its potential. By shifting the focus from the physical commons as an exploitable resource to the practice of commoning, this brief discussion has perhaps helped to illustrate and explain how an insider/outsider dichotomy might develop around a common resource, potentially resulting in suspicion and fear of 'outsiders', who represent a threat to the fragile social cohesion on which the practice of commoning and the identity of commoners depend.

2.2. Change and stasis on the commons

When a culture feels threatened, devalued or isolated it is likely to retrench and reinforce existing norms (Burton et al., 2020). A brief examination of the evolution of the concept of what it is to be a 'good farmer' can aid understanding of such retrenchment among commons graziers. Burton et al. (2020) trace the history of the 'good farmer' concept from that of a moral, family-orientated, upstanding and necessary member of the local community in the sixteenth century, through three centuries of productivism and use of technology as the imperative grew to feed an increasingly urban society. By the mid twentieth century, the 'good farmer' with a tidy farm controlled and exploited nature for maximum possible output, while market forces weakened the connection between farmer and community. These demands were within the context of an increasingly neoliberal hegemonic world system (Wallerstein, 2004), which replaced communal with individual values, and reciprocity with competition.

The pressure on the inherent values of commoning, such as community and reciprocity, is clear, and the capacity of hill-farmers and graziers to compete within neoliberal

markets limited. Neoliberalism frames farmers as entrepreneurial business people, behaving rationally to maximise profit. However, Stock et al. (2014, p.411) point towards conflicting values in farming, describing farmers as both 'deeply embedded in both natural landscapes and neoliberal policies', a cognitive disonance which may be increasingly difficult to sustain as the competing demands of productivism and environmental stewardship destabilise farmer identities (Letourneau & Davidson, 2022). However, any attempt to define farmer identity can be criticised for assuming a homogeneity among farmers that does not exist. Indeed, it could be argued that in resisting, even if only out of necessity, centuries of change in the concept of the 'good farmer', commoning culture has long been counter-hegemonic. Perhaps the contemporary normative identity of 'the good farmer' has left commons graziers, such as those on Welsh hill-farms, behind, reinforcing their existing norms and their perceived need to protect their culture, practices and identities from external threats. This helps to explain potential resistance to external actors and to change.

Recent literature on agricultural change suggests that 'path dependency' leads farmers to make decisions based upon what has worked in the past, thereby reinforcing tradition and the sense that things have always been done in a certain way (Sutherland et al., 2012). During periods of stability, path dependency is undisturbed, until destabilising 'trigger' events disrupt practices, potentially leading to rapid change which is followed by a newly formed path dependency (Sutherland et al., 2012). Burton et al. (2020) suggest that the concept of 'the good farmer', rather than a barrier, can be a useful basis for dialogue and the construction of new norms. In a review of literature relating to tree planting on agricultural land, Staddon et al. (2021) conclude that 'there will need to be a change in farmers' values, cultural beliefs and social norms', and refer to the need to 'identify the nudges' (ibid, p89) to move farmers towards meeting planting targets. However, rather than unstable contexts causing a change in values, they perhaps offer the opportunity for previously suppressed or latent values to rise to prominence (Downey et al., 2025). Perhaps those suppressed values are those which resemble 'the spirit of the commons'; perhaps the opportunity for those aspiring to increase tree cover on common land lies in understanding, valuing, empowering and working with the traditional values of commoning. Such an understanding needs to be grounded in an understanding of historical, cultural and place-based contexts.

3. The Welsh commons

3.1. History, evolution and survival of the Welsh commons

This essay grounds an understanding of graziers on Welsh commons in a brief history of those spaces, in which a repeated survival narrative of resistance to authority and private ownership leads Winchester (2022, p277) to describe them as 'theatres of dissent'. This deepens understanding of why Welsh hill-farming communities might feel an intrinsic reluctance to engage with external actors, even if inherent values are shared.

Wales was once covered largely by a mixed mosaic of temperate rainforests and lightly wooded mountainsides and was sparsely populated by kinship groups (Ayres & Wynne-Jones, 2014; Graves, 2024; Shrubsole, 2022). Until 1500, any farming would have been subsistence, with a few cattle and swine (Graves, 2024; Winchester, 2022). Between

1500–1800 aggressive enclosure of common land, largely by the English who began extensive sheep-farming to supply a lucrative wool-trade, changed both landscape and rural life in Wales (Winchester, 2022). Although enclosures were courageously resisted, the English landowners dealt swiftly and brutally with dissenters, eventually subduing the population (Williams, 1977). After enclosures, the weakened peasants were granted free use of 'manorial waste', land still privately owned but of negligible economic or agricultural value to landowners (Stamp & Hoskins, 1963). Farmers were assigned commoners' rights to use these 'common' lands to graze their livestock and to source peat and fallen wood for fuel. As Linebaugh (2014, p.109) points out, it was pragmatic (or perhaps cynical) of landowners to grant 'just enough' land to peasants to 'stop insurrection'. Upland Scotland shares a similar history of dispossession, with crofters displaced to make room for sheep enterprises generating profitable income for the lairds (Graves, 2024). However, Graves (p.100) suggests that Scottish crofters suffered more 'profound, terrible disruption and uprooting' in the clearances than the Welsh, whose history, despite 'tensions, struggle and real loss', has been more conducive to the survival of 'farming culture, woodland and associated wildlife'.

The Rebecca Riots of 1839–1843 highlighted the increasing divide between the powerful English-speaking gentry and the politically marginalised Welsh-speaking peasantry (National Archives, 2023; Tomos, 2021). Further land seizure followed during the Industrial Revolution, when agricultural land was seised for mining of coal, iron and slate (Wakelin, 2020) and communities were diminshed by migration of the landless poor to industrial centres; dispossessed and displaced people were forced to labour for English landowners and industrialists (Winchester, 2022). Dissent accompanied these processes. Williams (1977) frames Welsh radicalism from the 1800s onwards as anti-capitalist; the struggle for autonomy and self-sufficiency was futile as profits continued to flow from those working the land and resources to those owning them, which frequently meant they flowed over the border into England. Williams (1977, p.14) understatedly describes these as 'aspects of history that rankle'. Influential Welsh poet Thomas (2000) in a poem entitled 'Reservoirs' urged the Welsh to 'resist the English scavenging among the remains of our culture', suggesting a defeated nation with a lasting imperative to 'resist'.

Similar tensions persist today (Messenger, 2022) as disagreements continue over the pumping of water from existing reservoirs in Welsh valleys to supply English cities during increasingly frequent droughts (Nation Cymru, 2022). Much commons literature suggests that the politics of the commons are still dictated by the instinct of commoners to resist the 'ever present possibility of enclosure and dispossession' by outside forces (Kirwan et al., 2016, p.21). Now, however, the corporate and often multinational institutions challenging Welsh farmers' financial autonomy and land ownership in the present and future no longer operate in a singular national or geographical context.

Since the mid-twentieth century, outside forces of potential dispossession have come in different guises. Much Welsh farmland was lost to compulsory purchase for government-backed forestry, resulting in large areas of non-native conifer forest (Graves, 2024). When EU farming subsidies were ended by Brexit, the Welsh Government introduced Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES), through which 'Glastir' payments promoted management of farmland for nature, paying farmers for the carbon and biodiversity

assets on their land and for afforestation. An indirect result of Glastir payments was to incentivise and allow wealthy and powerful external actors, often corporates, to acquire Welsh farmland for the value of its embedded carbon assets and for offsetting schemes (Nation Cymru, 2021). The Welsh Government reported a steady increase in Glastir applications from addresses outside Wales. Farmers opposed many such sales (Whitehead, 2022) and concerns have been raised about a lack of transparency regarding the identity of purchasers (UK Parliament, 2022). There is a clear danger that economic pressures could force Welsh farming communities into neo-colonial, financially-dependent relationships with corporations, or may force them to sell to them, thereby weakening farming communities (Garside & Wyn, 2021).

Contributing to the perceived threats of displacement and afforestation, a high-profile controversy occurred in 2018 when the charity Rewilding Britain proposed a 'Summit to Sea' project to establish a rewilding corridor through Wales, connecting the mountains to the coast. The project ended in failure amid accusations of neo-colonialism and criticism of RWB for its failure to consult farmers (Fisher, 2018). This exacerbated farmers' hostility towards conservationists, effects which are still felt today; the word 'rewilding' is studiously avoided in conversations with Welsh farmers.

Through generations of determined resistance born largely of necessity, graziers have managed to retain their rights to the commons, though they remain vulnerable. The most recent formal assignment of commoners' rights was the 1965 Commons Registration Act, which allocates rights to properties abutting the commons. For over half a century, these rights have remained relatively unthreatened, commoners managing their affairs through self-governing Commons Associations within the wider governance of the state. Any actions taken on the commons need unanimous approval by commoners; this would include tree planting. Nevertheless, whatever their strengths might be in terms of social cohesion, commons remain vulnerable in law (Sydenham, 2016). Under the terms of the 2006 Commons Act, Commons Associations can now be replaced by Commons Councils, of which external actors can be members, and which are legally permitted to act without the consent of commoners (Sydenham, 2016, pp.110-112). NFU Cymru (2022) expressed concern: 'It is not yet clear whether [councils] would adequately protect the rights [of commoners …] from other parties and influences'. Seen through the eyes of the NFU and of graziers, Commons Councils could represent a deliberate and cynical weakening of their agency in favour of landowners and external actors.

3.2. Landscape change and the commons

The above exploration of factors affecting attitudes towards change at a local level is consistent with academic literature on heritage and sense of place. Both of these are widely framed as co-constructed by 'individuals, families, communities and nature' through shared memories which exclude outsiders (Dicks, 2000; McCarthy et al., 2023; Wynne-Jones et al., 2018, p.387). Such 'place congruent continuity' (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996, p.238) has led to an accepted framing of Welsh hill-farmers as the guardians of Welsh language, landscape, culture and identity (Shrubsole, 2022; Storey, 2014). Hawke (2012, p238) suggests that this is an 'authorised discourse', externally imposed upon a community. It could be argued, however, that the only way it was

imposed by external forces was by the need to resist external threats to both livelihood and identity. Nevertheless, it is understandable if graziers value their past and fear future change, particularly change introduced or even imposed by 'outsiders'. Exacerbating this are beliefs and perceptions concerning landscape, which can be subject to shifting baseline syndrome (Soga & Gaston, 2018), whereby perception of how the landscape has always been is limited to personal experience of that landscape, rather than accurate knowledge of a longer-term past. Therefore, tree-planting is likely to be perceived as novel rather than as a return to an earlier landscape, and therefore as a threat to a much-loved landscape which is inextricably linked to identity. In the face of threatened change, people often experience not only fear but emotions such as 'confusion and grief' which are usually associated with loss (Dicks, 2000; Roe, 2014, p.196), and which can 'reduce the possibility of active and critical engagement with the present' (Dicks, 2000, p.45) particularly when the present seems increasingly contested.

Even what might be considered conservation is associated with threat. Conservation, capital, corporate power and tree planting are often conflated not only in discourse but in reality. In their critique of dominant conservation paradigms, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) argue convincingly that practices of conservation, however well-meaning, often marginalise or displace those living on the land while further empowering the state or corporations. Whether the goal is to plant trees, buy farms or buy carbon credits from farmers, such schemes introduce external actors into the farmers' vulnerable world. In addition, there is mounting evidence that the global carbon markets into which farmers are being encouraged to venture are not the panacea they might seem, achieving minimal emissions reductions (Greenfield, 2023; West et al., 2023) and harming indigenous communities (Shankland & Hasenclever, 2011; Tienhaara, 2012). Again, the global commons are vulnerable. Brockington et al. (2009) warn that the commons, commodified, could eventually become embedded in the market rather than in local communities: exactly what the commons have always resisted. In such instances, not only is the insider/outsider dichotomy exposed, but the 'discursive blur' of neoliberal conservation (Büscher & Dressler, 2007, p. 596) creates confusion: farmers are encouraged to plant trees and to engage with external capital and markets, which are presented as the solution needed to save the commons from the potentially destructive influence of external capital and markets (Apostolopoulou & Adams, 2015; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). The commons have become something of a battleground between competing ideologies, while unclear distinctions exacerbate confusion and fear.

The decade 2020–2030 could in many ways be considered a conjunctural moment, or a moment of crisis (Eckersley, 2021; Hart, 2020; 2024) in land-use and farming in which the pressures on and expectations of farmers are many, disparate, complex and potentially existential. Building upon this discussion, and returning to Welsh farmers' refusal to comply with the government's scheme to plant 10% of their land with trees (Farming UK, 2023), this essay will now focus on tree planting on Welsh commons. Specifically, I investigate the case of two commons in South East Wales, where a woodland creation charity aims to plant trees. The experience and observations there suggest that it may not be about the trees at all, but about retrenchment, the insider/outsider dichotomy and the fear it engenders.

4. An illustrative case study

4.1. Context

During the summer of 2023, a woodland creation charity, Stump up for Trees (the charity), having successfully planted 130,000 native broadleaf trees on a common in SE Wales, called Bryn Arw, was keen to explore the potential for extending its project to other nearby commons. The charity was, at the time, run by a board of five members, of whom one was employed full-time while the others worked either part-time or as volunteers. The charity's co-founders live in the area around Bryn Arw, on which one is a seventh-generation active grazier who, in 2020, planted trees on his own land. Conversations with a non-farmer friend who shared his enthusiasm led to the co-founding of the charity, with a target of planting one million trees in the Bannau Brycheiniog (Brecon Beacons) area of SE Wales. The cofounders' relationships with graziers on Bryn Arw are facilitated by their pre-existing relationships and generational family ties. The team's professional attention to detail in ecological surveys and in understanding relevant laws and regulations has fostered conducive relationships with administrative bodies and has enabled them to foresee and navigate obstacles, while their energy, commitment, knowledge and sustained enthusiasm, along with skilful recruitment, have helped drive and sustain the charity's success. In 2023, the charity featured on BBC's Countryfile (Countryfile, 2023); the founders' commitment to biodiversity on the commons and the hard work in which they are personally engaged were evident.

Describing itself as 'an ambitious community-based charity focussed on woodland creation and enhancing biodiversity' (SUFT, 2023, np), the charity combines ecological and legal expertise with community engagement. Professional ecologists train and lead teams of volunteers in ecological surveys, bracken-bashing and tree-planting and maintenance. All trees are of local provenance and increasingly are sourced from the charity's community-run nursery. The charity's motivations are made explicit in all communications; these include enhancing biodiversity, sequestering carbon, landscape-restoration, protecting the commons from appropriation by external agencies, and strengthening community engagement with the commons and with each other. A registered charity, it is funded by donations and by 'innovative private-public funding initiatives', taking considerable care over its choice of partners, who it describes as 'progressive, environmentally-motivated organisations and individuals' including a number of businesses, the majority of which are small and local (SUFT, 2023, np). Despite all of the above, the charity continues to encounter societal barriers to its tree-planting ambitions, an exploration of the underlying causes of which could be enlightening. It is worth noting that resistance to their planting on other commons has exceeded any encountered on their home-ground of Bryn Arw.

4.2. Research

The two commons selected for the case study are, like Bryn Arw, privately owned uplands on which local graziers have commoners' rights to graze livestock. Each has its own Commoners' Association. The commons will remain anonymous to help protect participants' anonymity. In this essay, 'farmer' denotes all farmers, whether with or without commons

rights, whereas 'grazier' refers specifically to farmers who make active use of their commoning rights. Unless otherwise specified, 'tree planting' refers to the pattern of planting adopted by the charity, which is predominantly 'coed cae' and 'ffridd', both of which evade precise translation into English (Graves, 2024) but can collectively be described as small copses, trees in fields and scrubland.

My decision to conduct a case study followed Mabry's assertion (2009, p. 214) that case studies facilitate understanding of 'a community's approach to a prevailing societal issue'. Initially, to gain a basic understanding of the field, I explored the two commons on foot, camped in a nearby farm where I chatted informally with the farmer and a land agent, visited a local heritage centre and joined volunteers in two of the charity's tree-planting events. A visit to the charity's office to conduct key informant interviews with the Co-Founder and General Manager deepened my understanding of their work and their motivations and helped to establish the aims and objectives of the study. To avoid 'socio-economic lopsidedness' (Mabry, 2009, p. 223), I aimed to engage from each common the landowner, the Chair or Secretary of the Commoners' Association and at least two active graziers. Some contacts were available through the charity's existing network, others were identified by viewing the Commons Registers held by local councils.

The research and its findings have limitations. The small number of participants I succeeded in recruiting is evident in Table 1. While the landowners and secretaries of both commons were keen to participate, it was extremely difficult to recruit graziers, even through snowballing (Parker et al., 2019). For these reasons, our eventual sampling is best described as 'convenience sampling' (Mabry, 2009, p. 223) and the limitations of this unintended shallowness of the sample must be acknowledged. It would be a mistake to assume that the opinions and experiences provided by so few participants are necessarily representative of the wider community (Glucksmann, 2000; Hammersley, 2018). In fact, the reluctance of the majority of graziers to engage in the research was complex, suggesting contested viewpoints and offering valuable insights in itself. Sec A, after the interview had finished, indicated that other graziers had expressed interest in the subject matter but did not want to share their views with their neighbours. Subsequent attempts to engage these graziers failed. I also learned from Grazier B that some of my difficulties in recruiting others were due to the fact that I had caused

Table 1. Overview of interviewees.

Background of interviewees	Location of interview	Number of interviewees
The charity's Co-Founder and General Manager.	Charity office, Abergavenny.	2
Owners of common A (Owner A).	In their home	2
Owner of common B (Owner B).	Walking interview on the common	1
Secretary of Commoners' Association A; an active grazier. (Sec A)	In their home	1
Secretary of Commoners' Association B; an active grazier. (Sec B)	In their home.	1
Graziers of common B (Grazier B) one of whom was also Chair of the Commoners' Association (Chair B).	In the home of Secretary of Association B. One was present in person; one joined by Zoom (unanticipated).	2
		Total: 9

Source: Authors.

offence by interviewing the landowner first, which they perceived as 'going over their heads'. It was impossible to convince him that the timings of the telephone contact and the order in which interviews were eventually conducted were decided by participant responses and availability rather than by design. For these reasons, while insights gained from the data will be explored, its limitations are recognised.

Semi-structured interviews provide an appropriate method for gaining insights into how participants experience the forces affecting their lives (Miller & Glassner, 2016, p. 56). Their open-ended nature proved very useful for following up unexpected themes and responding to unanticipated dynamics (Mabry, 2009, p. 218). Being physically present rather than on-line allowed observation of body language, helping to understand the value, for some participants, of the opportunity to 'talk back' and express resistance (Miller & Glassner, 2016, p. 56), for example I was able to observe the firmly crossed arms of one participant. The unanticipated participation of the Chair of Common B by Zoom necessitated considerable flexibility as the Common B interviews took on the features of a focus group.

The question guide for interviews with graziers and landowners covered farm and family contexts; historic and present use of the common; sense of place, both physically and culturally; hopes for the future of the common; perceived opportunities and threats; experiences of and attitudes towards planting on farms and commons; and experience of Welsh Government policy. Interviews were inductive, lasting between 90–120 min and conducted in English. They were audio-recorded and then transcribed. NVivo 12 was used for thematic analysis of the data, to identify themes and develop theories. I recognise that my ontological, epistemological and political positions have probably influenced the analysis and the following discussion (Boyzatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006), particularly in the absence of more empirical data.

A further limitation to the research, but of interest in the exploration of the insider/outsider dichotomy, was my own positionality as an English female MSc researcher working in partnership with the charity. Not only did my externality affect participation and the interviews themselves, but as a cultural outsider I possibly missed nuances of dialect or subtle inferences (Mabry, 2009, p. 219). I hoped that by sharing my maternal Welsh farming heritage with participants, I might earn a degree of insider status (Doucet & Mauthner, 2009, p. 333) but it made no discernible difference, leading me to agree with Tang (2002) that perceptions of difference can be as significant as actual difference. Perhaps the most significant obstacle to discussion was one grazier's suspicion, probably exacerbated by the fact that I am over fifty, that I was not really an MSc student, but an agent of the charity, the Government, or both, helping them to create plantations of spruce trees on all Welsh commons. He trusted neither his government, nor the charity nor the research. Constant reflexivity was therefore essential as I tried to build trust and to find a balance between addressing misunderstandings and gathering the data revealed by the conversations. I prioritised the latter: it was not my role to argue for the charity.

Power dynamics between myself and the participants are also interesting to reflect upon. Academic discourse frequently critiques a researcher's position of power (Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2014), but power during these interviews was constantly shifting. Not only was I a visitor to their homes or their common, but interviewees explicitly pointed out that they had the power to block the charity's aspirations; one grazier

asserted his power, warning 'You'll never plant trees on [the common] as long as I can stop you' (Grazier B), mistakenly conflating my role with the charity's aims. Nevertheless, the dynamics were appropriate: my role was to allow participants' voices to be heard regarding the future of their commons.

4.3. Findings

Participants' strong sense of belonging to their land and to their community was evident from the beginning of all interviews as they were invited to talk about their farms. All but two participants had been born in the farmhouse in which they now live, which had in all cases been the family home for generations. The strength of their attachment was typified by '*I never want to leave'* (Owner A) and *'they'll have to carry me out in a box'* (Grazier B). The desire to sustain their current way of life and therefore the imperative to defend it from outside forces was equally strong. Chair B explained; '*Welsh upland farming is an entirely different way of life […]. I don't think any other job could have such an emotional attachment*' and added '*We're protective of our identity'*. All interviewees except Owner B (who had moved to the area from outside) claimed that the landscape had not changed at all during their lifetimes, extending to a belief that it has always been relatively devoid of trees, consistent with the shifting baseline theory described above (Soga & Gaston, 2018). Owner A described himself and his graziers as '*custodians of the landscape*'. When asked about their vision for the next decade, Chair B's blunt two-word response, '*No change',* was representative of the others. However, Sec A, when invited to envision an ideal future, described riding a horse through sunlit woodland.

Their deep, even visceral connections are with both their community and with their land. Grazier B, who had, as a young man, had to leave the family farm to work in local coal mines, described the time he spends alone on the common in all weathers as his 'best times', his relationship with the land developed by memories of both joy and trauma, as was evident when he described an incident when, his leg broken and trapped by his tractor, he spent two hours alone in the landscape. It was evident from words, tone of voice and body language that culture, heritage and the traditions of hill farming elicited considerable emotion.

In contrast, concerns regarding the practical matters of woodland creation, such as changes in farming practice, concern about fire risk, protecting peatland, and the reluctance to erect fences, occupied only a minor proportion of the conversations. Perhaps more significantly, even though hill farms are small, yielding little income, there was only one reference in the data to concerns regarding income or productivity: ''*We couldn't survive without our common (…) our farm is only 70 acres so the common makes it viable (…). That's the same for most of the people that use the commons now'* (Sec B). This references the fear that '*our common*' may somehow be lost. Indeed, I learned that graziers on a nearby Welsh common had collectively refused to participate in the Glastir incentive scheme, thereby voluntarily forgoing potential income. The fact that graziers continue to farm despite the constant struggle to break-even suggests that survival of their current way of life is a greater concern than profit (Fremstadt, 2021; Mills et al., 2018).

This perception of threat from external actors was evident, not only in their suspicions of the research, but elsewhere in the data. Grazier B said that he feels '*threatened on all*

sides'. Particularly pertinent to the contestation between the charity and Welsh graziers is an ongoing suspicion of afforestation, with one participant accusing the charity of plans to plant '*vast forestry plantations [of sitka spruce] covering the whole commons*'. Fear was as evident as suspicion when he raised his voice to continue; '*You people are trying to take over […]. Obviously there's an incentive behind this scheme […] it's thousands of acres you want to plant. I'm fully convinced that it's government-backed and all to do with carbon storage. This is a government-led job.*' Such conflation of the research, the government and the charity suggests an emotional rather than a rational reaction, but it is understandable: I was researching barriers to the charity's goals; the target of planting one million trees is the charity's target rather than that of the graziers; the target echoes government pressures on farmers to plant trees on their land. The history of the Welsh commons, as described above, helps to contextualise and understand such fear, and therefore to understand the resistance being faced by the charity.

Confusion and distrust might be further exacerbated by the charity's communication regarding its fund-raising strategy. Although one of the co-founders specifically referred to 'the wholesale planting of farms by corporates' as 'a disaster' and urged farmers in general 'not to sell up', he then advised farmers to 'look at carbon offset as an opportunity' (BBC, 2021). Again, distinctions between the charity and the corporate world are unclear. To survive and grow, the charity needs to explore sources of income. This has led to the pragmatic decision to create funding partnerships with businesses, thereby introducing new actors onto the commons. This merits critical analysis. The carbon off-setting market presents an opportunity for the charity to raise funds for further planting and management of trees and perhaps to help generate income for graziers. In pragmatic, considered decisions, the charity has formalised partnerships with companies and individuals described as 'progressive and environmentally motivated' with 'the resources and vision to help realise our ambition' (SUFT, 2023). The charity's three most significant corporate partners pay for planting and maintaining trees; they are not buying the carbon embedded in the commons. This is an important distinction, because through this model there is a tangible positive result of their donations. The presentation of these partnerships on the charity's website is prominent and positive; however, as participants in the case study did not refer to this, it is possible that they are not familiar with the website. Nevertheless, others may be, which, as the following discussion will reveal, could have damaging consequences.

Welcoming external actors onto this stage complicates the plot. Compared with the charity's careful presentation of these partnerships, their partners are perhaps a little less sensitive to the possible impact on graziers. With potential customers as their target audience, all three partners' websites highlight their relationships with the charity, explaining clearly the purpose of their investments: one pays for tree-planting to offset their own emissions; one acts as an off-setting agent for clients; the third offers tree-planting as an incentive to attract new customers. This third company, Utility Warehouse, actually renames Bryn Arw, inviting customers to 'grow [their] stake in the Utility Warehouse Woodland'; the page is headed by a photograph of the charity's founder standing on Bryn Arw (UW, 2023, np). This virtual appropriation of a nearby common could be perceived as a threat to heritage and identity, and is likely to increase resistance among graziers on other commons. Perhaps aware of concerns about 'the fetishisation of nature' (Brockington et al., 2009, p. 335) through which

'consumers' are distanced from 'products', Utility Warehouse's website also invites customers to 'get [their] hands dirty' by volunteering on Bryn Arw/Utility Warehouse Woodland. Inviting people into nature is consistent with moving towards new ways of living with nature but this is an example of a human/nature relationship being dictated, even if unintentionally, by 'neoliberal logics and practices' (Apostolopoulou & Adams, 2015, p. 28) and could result in graziers feeling alienated from their common. It could be argued that the charity is now acting as an unelected and uninvited intermediary, opening up the common to external interests (Larner & Laurie, 2010). This 'discursive blur' (Büscher & Dressler, 2007, p. 596) of the charity's discourses about trees, forestry, landscape change and complex financial market mechanisms could well be a contributing factor in graziers' resistance, and could be perpetuating the lack of trust at the heart of the contestation on the Welsh commons.

5. Concluding comments

We addressed the problem of the UK's inadequate progress towards meeting tree-planting targets by asking the question: 'is it really about the trees?'. To distil the question in the interest of identifying salient factors, we focused on common land. We began by conceptualising the commons and exploring the culture of commoning, before moving to a discussion of stasis and change on the commons and in farmer identities. We narrowed the focus still further onto Welsh common land, where we identified a centuries-long survival narrative of resistance. Narrowing the focus even more closely, we illustrated the discussion with a case study on two upland commons in South East Wales, where graziers were resisting efforts by a local woodland creation charity to plant trees. Drawing upon the above, we find that trees do not appear to be the real problem at the heart of resistance to tree-planting goals.

The global commons have long had to resist external forces in order to survive. This is true of Welsh hill farmers whose livelihoods and their commoning way of life have been continually threatened by external forces. It is hardly surprising that graziers, deeply rooted both generationally and geographically within their local communities and within a survival narrative of resistance, should consider themselves guardians of their culture, their way of life and their landscape, to which external actors are considered a threat. Change has become synonymous with any external actor or force, and is therefore to be resisted. Members of the woodland creation charity within the case study, although based locally and working with local people, are considered outsiders to the commons' communities. Despite their underlying respect and concern for graziers and for local ecologies, their work to enhance community engagement and their desire to protect the commons from appropriation by external agencies, they are regarded at best with suspicion, at times with hostility. Graziers' ongoing suspicions of the charity's motives suggest a failure in communication, which may be caused by graziers' lack of willingness to engage as much as by mistakes on the charity's part.

However, this insider/outsider dichotomy so far identified may be an over-simplification of the struggle at the heart of the contestation on the commons. This essay reveals other forces at play; we need to consider the possibility of a wider conflict and a different dichotomy, which might then have relevance beyond the commons. Bruno Latour (2002, p.3) argues that in any struggle, it is essential to identify *correctly* (my itallics) the

struggle's opposing forces; 'only then', he argues, 'can we conceptualise solving the problem' which, in a world facing poly-crises, is an imperative for all research (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Eckersley, 2021; Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2010).

Historically, the forces against which commoners have struggled and continue to struggle to defend their livelihoods and culture have largely been extractive and profit-driven, from the lucrative wool trade of the 1500s to the carbon markets of today. Commoners have resisted first capitalist and now neoliberal hegemonic prioritisation of competition over cooperation, of profit over care, of resource-exploitation over resource-conservation and of Hardin's individualism over Ostrom's evidence of successful cooperation. Although now threatened by the increasingly powerful and increasingly global threats of neoliberal hegemony, some of the values of community and cooperation inherent in commoning culture still survive, suppressed rather than destroyed and, although they remain fragile, they may be ready to rise to prominence again if given the opportunity and agency. Supporting this possibility is the fluidity of the concept of 'the good farmer' which has changed in parallel to hegemonic thinking and could return to a pre-industrial responsibility to community and to the environment (Burton et al., 2020; Fremstadt, 2021). The values of the 'good climate farmer' (Burton et al., 2020, p161) could align with the values embedded in the practice of commoning. The resultant empowering of Welsh hill-farmers and commons graziers could lead to conversation and potentially collaboration with those currently perceived as outsiders if those actors can fully and visibly embrace commoning values. For the charity, this might involve reconsidering models of funding.

We therefore suggest that the problem at the heart of difficulties in working together to achieve tree planting targets does not concern trees, and is wider than an insider/outsider dichotomy. The political ecologist Arturo Escobar challenges academics to address the question: 'How do we inhabit the earth in a different way?' (2023, np). At the heart of his work is the concept of the 'pluriverse', a word he uses to denote a 'new ontology of the human', and 'an entirely different conception of life' (ibid.), which, he argues, is the antithesis to modern global capitalism (Escobar, 2021). With the prefix 'pluri' in direct contrast to 'uni', he is recommending diversity of thinking and of practice, rather than uniformity. The 'opposing forces' Latour (2002) insists we identify, which are at the heart of the contestation on the Welsh commons might be seen more widely as pluriversal thinking on one hand and neoliberal hegemony on the other.

This interpretation of literature, policies and empirical data suggests that Escobar's 'different conception of life' already exists in the culture of commoning. Global movements such as Convivia, La Via Campesina, Buen Vivir and Degrowth (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Gudynas, 2014; Hickel, 2021; LVC, 2025) are at the heart of current efforts to manage the diverse global commons through collaboration, care, stewardship and reciprocity. This points to the importance of moving forward together on a case-by-case basis, empowering and collaborating, sharing ideas, with consistent core values at heart. Perhaps Kirwan et al. (2016, p. 23) are right when they attribute to the commons the power to 'inform hope and to speak of other worlds', much as Shucksmith and Rønningen (2011, p. 275) when they explore the idea that 'upland areas may be a promising site for alternative visions of the future to emerge'. We suggest that by identifying and exposing the pluriversal/neoliberal dichotomy we can work towards solutions not only to problems on the commons of South East Wales, but to other problems

globally. The commons could offer the hope and alternative visions we need in a world confronted, as it is, with multiple crises. The trees we plant need to be diverse and resilient, rooted deeply in our places, cultures and communities, with heartwoods of collaboration, reciprocity and care.

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