



Visionary thinking

As the UK gears up for a general election, whoever comes to power will face a series of critical challenges, on which highly skilled geographers are helping to advise

Contrary to popular perception, land in the UK is relatively undeveloped, with agriculture dominating more than 70 per cent of the land surface, and nearly 12 per cent covered by woodland. Since the end of the Second World War, the UK has largely contained urban sprawl in order to ensure enough land is available for food production, and to provide green spaces for people to enjoy.

Now, with demographic shifts, climate change and changing patterns of work and habitation intensifying pressure on this finite resource, the ways in which the UK's land is used and managed will have important consequences for everyone's quality of life, whether they live in the country or the city.

Two prominent geographers and Society Fellows have been helping the government address the question of how to make the most of Britain's land in the 21st century. Mark Tewdwr-Jones, professor of spatial planning and governance at University College London, and John Goddard, professor of

regional development studies at Newcastle University, belong to the nine-member lead expert group working on Land Use Futures, one of several major projects commissioned by the UK Foresight programme.

Part of the Government Office for Science, the Foresight programme brings together cutting-edge research, knowledge and ideas to provide policy makers with 'visions of the future'. These high-level predictions aim to inform strategy relating to complex issues such as obesity and the risks of flooding and coastal erosion, and to improve the way in which the latest science and technological innovations are used to address them.

Over the past two years, the Land Use Futures lead expert group has gathered evidence from a 300-strong team of specialists for a report that explores the competing demands on the UK's land, how equipped the nation is to deal with those demands, and how we might 'unlock' the value of land in different ways to

meet our social, economic, environmental and cultural needs.

'We can't go on expecting land to deliver more homes, better transport, food, drinking water and energy at a time when we're projecting a population increase of nine million by 2031 and 15 million by 2050, we have an uncertain economy and climate change is likely to lead to an increase in flooding,' Mark explains. 'This combination of current and future problems means we need a new set of priorities.'

The report refers to the Greater South East of England – one of the UK's wealthiest regions and its most geographically varied – as an example of how particular tensions could develop in a specific region. Already under pressure to release protected areas and greenfield sites for development, the Southeast is likely to come under increasing stress if long-term economic and associated population growth rates continue.

The report concludes that the government faces a number of critical choices in the years ahead, from identifying the priorities for land use to accommodating the increasing need for residential and commercial development while protecting highly valued natural assets, as well as engaging people and communities on the future use of land while addressing national priorities.

This is just one of the many pressing challenges with significant geographical dimensions that the UK faces today. And leading geographers are among the experts advising heads of government and business on how people, places and environments are likely to respond to future scenarios.

With an unrivalled body of geographical knowledge and expertise among its membership and beyond, the Society is well placed to make recommendations on relevant issues, and is actively promoting the relevance of geography to policy.

■ For more information on the Society's involvement in policy and public affairs, visit www.rgs.org/policy

■ For more information about the Land Use Futures project and the Foresight programme, visit www.foresight.gov.uk

JIM MORAN

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The Society carries out a wide range of activities to support these aims. We support research groups; promote geography within the national curriculum; produce scholarly publications; provide training in scientific field techniques and expeditions; offer information through our large map collection, library and picture library, and engage the wider public through our popular national lecture series.

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ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY (WITH IBG)

SELECTION OF EVENTS



6 MAY – 2 JULY

THE CREATIVE COMPASS (Exhibition, London)

An exhibition of unique works inspired by the art of maps and mapping and the Society's collections, produced by London-based artists Susan Stockwell and Agnes Poitevin-Navarre, who have been undertaking a year-long commission from the Society, with funding from the British Arts Council. Both artists have shown their work internationally.

① Free, open to the public, Monday to Friday, 10am–5pm. For more details, visit www.rgs.org/exhibitions

12 MAY, 7PM

THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF NATURAL NAVIGATION (Lecture, Coventry)

Tristan Gooley discovered the rare art of natural navigation after undertaking solo crossings of the Atlantic Ocean. He explains how using the sun, moon, stars, weather, plants and animals to provide navigational clues can enrich every journey.

Venue: University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL.
① For further details, contact the Events Office on events@rgs.org or 020 7591 3100

25 MAY, 7PM

21ST CENTURY CHALLENGES: NATURAL DISASTERS: HOW CAN WE IMPROVE? (Discussion series, London)

Join a panel of experts to discuss how can we improve our response to natural disasters in order to ensure that vulnerable communities worldwide benefit in the long term.

① Tickets: RGS-IBG members £7, non-members £10. For further details, visit www.21stcenturychallenges.org. To book, please contact the Events Office on events@rgs.org or 020 7591 3100, or book online at www.rgs.org/whatson

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10 AND 11 MAY

LAND ROVER DRIVER TRAINING (Fieldwork and expeditions event, Eastnor Castle, Hereford)

In partnership with corporate benefactors Land Rover, the Society's Geography Outdoors centre offers this practical driver training course on key driving and safety techniques for anyone planning to undertake work in remote areas.

① Cost: £150. For further details, visit www.rgs.org/GOseminars or contact Geography Outdoors on go@rgs.org or 020 7591 3030

17 MAY, 6.30PM

IS MORE EQUAL MORE GREEN? (Lecture, London)

Illustrated with extraordinary maps and drawing on his latest studies, this talk by Danny Dorling, professor of human geography at the University of Sheffield, will explore why affluent countries that have more equitable societies appear to pollute less than affluent countries that are more socially divided.

① Free for RGS-IBG members and guests only. For further details, contact the Events Office on events@rgs.org or 020 7591 3100

UNTIL 30 MAY

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY: EDWARD WILSON IN ANTARCTICA, 1902–12 (Exhibition, Coniston)

A selection of watercolours by Edward Wilson, naturalist and doctor on the Scott expeditions. Venue: Brantwood, Coniston, Cumbria LA21 8AD. Organised by the Society's North West regional committee.

① Open daily, 11am–5.30pm. Tickets: free to RGS-IBG members; non-members, £6.95. For further details, contact 01539 441 396 or enquiries@brantwood.org.uk