

Controlled fires, politics, and the media

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A golden rule in science communication is to be in charge – particularly when communicating sensitive topics. When our recent review on the use of fire and UK peatlands (Davies et al. 2016a) was accidentally released into the public domain prior to publication, we were certainly not in charge. The international fire ecology literature recognises that there are many potential benefits from the controlled use of fire, yet this tool is frequently viewed negatively in the UK. This may be at least partly due to its association with (creating habitat for) grouse hunting. In Davies et al. (2016a) we highlighted this controversy. We countered recent publications that portrayed controlled fires as having predominantly negative impacts on the environment (including water quality), often based on studies of potentially severe wildfires. We furthermore explored both the benefits and negative consequence of controlled burns. As fire is a highly political and emotional topic in the UK, we planned a press release upon publication of our paper to take the lead in the communication. The accidental release however prevented us from doing so, and came about inadvertently through one of us following the new rules of publication for University staff within the UK, designed to satisfy the Research Excellence Framework guidelines, i.e. that the accepted version of all papers should be entered immediately on acceptance into institutional repositories. To avoid similar issues, we suggest that all authors of commentary papers, especially if controversial, should endure that embargo terms are enforced in repository depositions strictly to prevent this happening. Ironically, our paper that called for informed, unbiased debate was used out of context by groups aligned with different wider environmental, social and political agendas. Our scientific credibility was consequently questioned in a blog by a prominent Guardian journalist, who disagreed with us on the focus of our review (fire effects, not the ideal state of the British uplands). We responded to his arguments not just informally but also in the peer-reviewed literature (Davies et al. 2016b). Though it may be unconventional, and not suited to all journals, we hope that more scientists (like for instance Wynne-Jones 2016) will discuss their challenges with science communication in the peer-reviewed literature, to not only create a scientific record of these cases for study but also to provide potential inspiration and support for scientists in similar situations. Likewise, we very much welcome peer-reviewed journals like *Proceedings of Peerage of Science* and *Nature Conservation* that facilitate scientific debate after the typical process of paper publication –comment – response, and that are thereby willing to consider and publish commentaries and debates that may originate outside the scientific literature.

- Davies GM, Kettridge N, Stoof CR, Gray A, Ascoli D, Fernandes PM, Marrs R, Allen KA, Doerr SH, Clay GD, McMorrow J, Vandvik V (2016a) The role of fire in UK peatland and moorland management: the need for informed, unbiased debate. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B: Biol.Sci.* 371.
- Davies GM, Kettridge N, Stoof CR, Gray A, Marrs R, Ascoli D, Fernandes PM, Allen KA, Doerr SH, Clay GD, McMorrow J, Vandvik V (2016b) Informed debate on the use of fire for peatland management means acknowledging the complexity of socio-ecological systems. *Nature Conservation*, 16, 59. ** this paper was initially submitted to the peer-reviewed commentary journal *Proceedings of Peerage of Science* that offers forwarding of accepted manuscripts to other journals that do have impact factors. After acceptance in ProPoS, this manuscript was then forwarded, assessed and accepted by *Nature Conservation* **
- Wynne-Jones S (2016) Flooding and media storms – controversies over farming and upland land-use in the UK. *Land Use Policy*, 58, 533-536.