

MEETING WITH FRANK GASKELL, EUROMONTANA'S SENATOR

Member of the founding Board of Euromontana from 1996, Frank Gaskell was President of the association from 2000 to 2008. Until 2008, he was also the Secretary and then Head of International Affairs of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the economic and community development agency of northern and western Scotland. Member of Euromontana Senate since the end of his presidency, Frank Gaskell brings his expertise on sustainable territorial development to the association and shares with us his thoughts for mountains' development in the future.



Frank Gaskell
Senator of Euromontana

***Euromontana:* how do you foresee the future development of mountain areas in the next decades?**

Frank Gaskell: "In the 24 years since the inception of Euromontana we have seen so many unpredictable regional and global crises that it is futile to attempt any vision for the next 10 years let alone 30 years. The future is not a place we are going to, it is a destination we make ourselves.

In a 2050-time frame I am confident of only one constant and that is that there will continue to be a compelling rationale and practical mission for the Euromontana network of mountain areas across the whole of Europe.

Our strength is in the true commonality of the challenges we face, the opportunities we can create and the privilege we have of sharing a goal to sustain and secure our fragile communities, culture and precious environment as assets for the European generations to come. That 'raison d'être' will endure."

How can we participate in preserving these assets?

"From Norway to Macedonia our mountain communities have for generations endured the same daily adversities of isolation, tenuous accessibility to markets and services, and population drift. But more importantly we have all inherited the same resilience, tenacity and ingenuity that survival in these conditions has demanded and so, given the opportunity, we are more than capable of sustaining our communities and capitalising on our unique natural strengths for the greater benefit of all. And Europe has never been in more dire need of the exquisite mountain environment, products, and culture we share. Our focus now must be to engage relentlessly with the architects of European future policy at this crucial time to ensure they understand the key components our areas offer and that they recognise and facilitate the vital contribution we have to make.

Fortunately for the mountains and for wider Europe the current convergence of global challenges we are facing offers a window of opportunity where the course of economic and social strategy can be adjusted and reset.

To succeed we must articulate our case boldly, identify our allies well and take care to understand and accommodate the valid concerns of other actors sensitively."

Can you be more specific about this window of opportunity and the current challenges and opportunities you are referring to?

"The development of the EU's 2021-2027 Programme, especially in respect of Cohesion Policy and the Environmental and Agricultural Policy, dictates the trajectory of the welfare and sustainability of mountain areas and communities not only for the next seven years but beyond. Influencing the final version of these policies is still possible and offers a welcome challenge.

The impact of global events moves the debate in a positive direction for the recognition and enhancement of mountain economic, social and environmental and potential. For many years in European policy there has been a tension between Urban and Rural interests. The tide has been running in the direction of agglomeration and the urban areas as the focus of economic and social development and away from the philosophy of spatially balanced place based development which can better harness the precious but fragile resources of the mountains and other deeply rural regions."

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Do you believe that the COVID-19 crisis can change the attention given to rural areas, including mountainous ones?

"For a long time, we have argued that the promotion of agglomeration-led development has been misguided. It may rest on compelling arguments of market demand and economies of scale, but it overlooks the diseconomies and negative externalities of congestion, social friction, excess energy consumption, pollution ... and, yes, risks of enhancing disease transmission!

Simultaneously this policy threatens the dereliction of the furthest and deepest rural areas and their provision of public goods in the form of high biodiversity, cultural, environmental and climate friendly benefits that are not sufficiently rewarded on the market.

The devastating impact of COVID-19 and its emerging correlation with density of population has regrettably given a sharper focus to our case. Coincidentally the rise of demonstrably effective remote working due to lockdown must dilute the rationale for urban concentration and open the prospect of siting high quality remote working locations in the excellent environment offered by mountain and remote areas. Suddenly the practicality of delivering effective education and medical services remotely is shown to be the realistic option we have always said it was. At last information technology can genuinely deliver on its early promise to be 'the death of distance'!

This renaissance and remodelling of our remote rural economies is not simply a digital dream it is a practical destination with wider rationale. There are many drivers. Climate change and the imperative to increasingly harness and develop renewable energy sources give mountain areas a comparative advantage not just as energy generators but as logical sites for energy dependent commercial undertakings.

But the mountains' strongest suit is our cultural heritage and custodianship of environmental quality reinforced by biodiversity generating and landscape friendly extensive agriculture."

How can the EU accelerate this renaissance and transition in the coming years?

"It is here that the Commissions current framework and consultation offer the greatest opportunities for positive policy influence. There is little room to criticise the framework they offer. The Green Deal with its objective to restore biodiversity and cut pollution, the EU Biodiversity Strategy as part of Green Deal, and the commitment to deliver on Sustainable Development Goals.

These approaches present mountain areas with open goals but we have to ensure we engage as serious and articulate team players to make the most of these crucial scoring chances. Without compromising the genuine strength of our own arguments, we must work with the widest range of consonant partners and allies. Here we are ahead of the game – we have a solid track record of working with, and nurturing and navigating alliances whether through inter groups or in ad hoc partnerships. We have found real common ground with the Small Islands and quality foods groupings. On environmental issues we share a virtual identity of interest with the authoritative High Nature Value network. We have a good case and are not short of allies.

The game is there to be won!"

