

EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

14 NOVEMBER 2006

THE CONDITION OF SITES OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST ON EXMOOR

Report of the Head of Conservation and Land Management

Purpose of Report:

To update Members on the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest on Exmoor, especially those in the ownership of the Authority, and to outline work being carried out to improve their condition in line with the Public Service Agreement target for 2010

Legal Implications(including Human Rights Act 1998 and Equality Issues):

Sites of Special Scientific Interest are covered by a range of legislation especially the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Countryside and Right of Way Act 2000 and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. Section 28G of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) requires public bodies to "take reasonable steps, consistent with the proper exercise of their functions, to further the conservation and enhancement of SSSIs".

Financial and Risk Implications:

Provision is made in the annual revenue budget for practical management work on Sites of Special Scientific Interest owned by the Authority and this is match-funded by Natural England under a formal management agreement arrangement.

Business Plan 2006/2007:

A/03/02 Achieving favourable condition of SSSI moorland owned by the National Park Authority

A/04/04 Achieving favourable condition of SSSI woodlands owned by the National Park Authority

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the Authority NOTES the information in this report.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In 2004 the government set a series of Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets for public bodies to meet.
- 1.2 One of the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) targets is to bring "into favourable condition by 2010 95 per cent of all nationally important wildlife sites." Nationally important wildlife sites are the notified Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).
- 1.3 Currently Natural England (the successor body for English Nature) estimates that 73% of all SSSIs (by area) are either in 'favourable' or 'unfavourable recovering' condition. In the South West the situation is slightly better with 79% of SSSIs meeting this target

2. THE CONDITION OF SSSIs IN EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK

- 2.1 Within the National Park the picture is less encouraging as only 68% of the SSSIs are in favourable or unfavourable recovering condition. Although below the national average, it is slightly better than the situation in National Parks as a whole, where 65% of Sites are in favourable or unfavourable recovering condition.

- 2.2 On Exmoor the main areas that are defined as being in unfavourable condition are moorlands or heathlands which are effected by overgrazing or, increasingly, undergrazing, and areas such as the former Royal Forest where excessive burning and heavy grazing has reduced the dwarf shrubs in the vegetation to a low level. In addition some of the oak woodlands are suffering from deer grazing preventing regeneration, as well as the spread of beech and rhododendron.

3 CONDITION OF SSSIs ON NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY LAND

- 3.1 The situation on the SSSIs owned by the National Park Authority is summarised in Table 1 below and outlined in more detail in the appendices.

Table 1 Condition of SSSIs owned by the National Park Authority

	Favourable	Unfavourable recovering	Unfavourable No change	Unfavourable declining	TOTAL
Moorland	360 (10%)	1001(27%)	2297(60%)	107(3%)	3765
Woodland	15 (6%)	121(51%)	34(14%)	69(29%)	239
TOTAL	375(9%)	1121(29%)	2331(58%)	176(4%)	4004

- 3.2 The condition of the SSSIs owned by the National Park Authority (as assessed by English Nature) is cause for concern and particular efforts have been made over the last few years in an attempt to meet the PSA target. The Authority has allocated £30,000 per annum, which is matched-funded by English Nature through a management agreement, to fund practical conservation work in its SSSIs. Funding for woodland conservation work has also been available through the Forestry Commission and the Authority's tenants have been able to access funding for moorland conservation through the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme..
- 3.3 Much of this work has carried out since the last evaluation of condition made by English Nature (which, for woodland was carried out in 2003 and 2004) and English Nature staff have indicated that the National Park Authority's woodlands are likely to be considered to be unfavourable recovering when next reviewed.
- 3.4 The majority of moorland areas that are considered to be in unfavourable condition fall within the former Royal Forest of Exmoor and are a result of previous land management regimes. Most of this area is now in the Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme and is covered by agreed management plans that the tenants are implementing. This should mean that when they are re-evaluated they will meet the condition target.
- 3.5 However the tenant of the Authority's and at Hoarok and the Chains is not in the ESA scheme and there is still an indication that the area is overgrazed. He has shown some interest in entering new Environmental Stewardship scheme and this will be encouraged.
- 3.6 The tenant of the Authority's land at Warren, near Simonsbath has, under a joint management agreement with English Nature and the Authority, begun actively restoring some 400 hectares of moorland using techniques originally developed in the Peak District. This has involved cutting and spraying the purple moor grass (*Molinia*) and applying heather seed. This approach should achieve rapid establishment of heather, thus satisfying the SSSI condition criteria. It is however an expensive process and arguably is at odds with the historic landscape character of the Royal Forest.
- 3.7 At Cosgate Hill (on the coast at County Gate, mid way between Porlock and Lynton) achieving favourable SSSI condition is dependent on re-establishing grazing. This would involve installing cattle grids on the A39 and possibly on private access drives off that road. Possible funding for this work is currently being explored as part of the bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund under its Landscape Partnership programme being worked up through the Exmoor Moorland Initiative.

- 3.8 Extensive scrub and Rhododendron clearance at the coastal slopes of North Hill, at Minehead and at Haddon Hill, near Dulverton has seen these areas moved from unfavourable declining and unfavourable no change respectively to unfavourable recovering in the last year as a result of work carried out by the Authority and funded through the management agreement with English Nature.

4 **CONCLUSION**

- 4.1 While a significant proportion of the SSSI land owned by the National Park Authority is currently defined as being in unfavourable condition much work is being done to achieve the PSA target and there is optimism that when these Sites are next assessed many will be reclassified as being in recovering or favourable condition. Further work will be carried out on areas of the estate that do not yet meet the SSSI condition target, with a focus on land directly managed by the Authority. Efforts will also continue to be made to encourage and assist the Authority's tenants to implement their ESA moorland management plans and, in particular, to help the tenant of the Chains and Hoarok to enter the Environmental Stewardship scheme.

David Lloyd
Team Leader, Moorland and Wildlife
2 November 2006

**Appendix1: Condition assessment of Exmoor National Park
Authority land – moorland SSSIs**

Condition	Unit	Area (ha)	Date of Survey	Issues	Work done since survey
Unfavourable declining	Hoarook/Warcombe	107	8/10/04	Overgrazing and stocking still too high	Tenant under Defra grazing restrictions.
Unfavourable no change	The Chains	380	5/11/03	Overgrazing	
	Driver Farm – south of dam	39	5/11/02	Overgrazing	ESA moorland management plan agreed by tenant
	south of the Chains	26	5/12/02	Overgrazing, over burning	
	Bill Hill/Goat Hill	39	18/2/03	Overgrazing	
	Exmoor Forest Estate - Exe Plain	275	14/11/00	Overgrazing, Ditches in bogs	ESA moorland management plan agreed by tenant Grazing levels have been reduced and ditches blocked as part of the MIRE project
	Lanacombe	423	27/8/02	Over burning and overgrazing	Burning and cutting plans being implemented by tenant
	Ricksy Ball and slopes below Cornham Farm	44	20/3/03	Overgrazing	Addressed in moorland management plan
	Long Holcombe	178	13/2/02	Undergrazing	ESA moorland management plan agreed by tenant Cattle handling pen needed.
	Warren Farm - Warren/Toms Hill	515	3/12/01	Undergrazing, over burning	Management agreement with EN/ENPA and tenant to restore the area agreed and work begun
	Hayes /Elsworthy	169	3/12/01	Undergrazing, over burning	Grazing increased (see above) and cutting of <i>Molinia</i> carried out
	Larkbarrow (south)	185	24/9/98	Undergrazing,	ESA moorland management plan agreed by tenant, but no cattle due to TB restrictions

Condition	Unit	Area (ha)	Date of Survey	Issues	Work done since survey
	Cosgate Hill	24	19/12/00	Undergrazing too much western gorse	Cattle grids needed on A39 – no action yet
Unfavourable recovering	Exmoor Forest Estate – Deer Park	156	13/2/02	Bogs in good condition, dwarf shrub content low	ESA moorland management plan agreed by tenant
	Horsen/ Gt. Woolcombe	257	27/8/02	Bogs and mires in good condition, but Molinia undergrazed	ESA moorland management plan agreed by tenant. TB restrictions have reduced cattle grazing
	Burcombe	162	26/7/02	Bogs in good condition, but dwarf shrub content low	ESA moorland management plan agreed, grazing levels appropriate. Wildfires may have damaged bogs
	R. Barle above Simonsbath	6	28/2/06	Japanese knotweed present	Joint control programme annually by EN/EA/ENPA all sites sprayed
	R.Barle below Simonsbath	20	28/2/06	Japanese knotweed present	Joint control programme annually by EN/EA/ENPA all sites sprayed
	Mill Hill	119	29/10/01	Heath in good condition except for uniform age structure	ESA moorland management plan agreed by tenant will ensure some areas left unburnt to mature
	Haddon Hill	61	24/1/06	Undergrazed, Control of Rhodo. and scrub needed	Programme of control of Rhodo. and scrub under way.
	North Hill (except coastal slopes)	152	13/6/00	Heath in good condition but grazing and bracken control needed.	Fencing and cattle grid completed – cattle and Exmoor ponies grazing, bracken and scrub control in progress
	North Hill (coastal slopes)	68	28/2/06	Rhododendron control effective but needs to continue	Rhododendron control carried out and will need to continue

Condition	Unit	Area (ha)	Date of Survey	Issues	Work done since survey
Favourable	Pinkery Pond	1	25/2/03		Tenant under Defra grazing restrictions, but evidence these not being followed
	The Chains – earth heritage site	7	6/10/02		
	Prayway/ Gt Ashcombe	63	12/2/03	Mires in good condition, dwarf shrubs on slopes heavily grazed	Grazing levels addressed in moorland management plan
	Halsecombe	35	8/4/02	Mires in good condition, old ditch through one. Grazing a bit high	Ditch can be blocked through MIRE project, moorland management plan will address grazing level
	Larkbarrow (North)	198	5/3/02	Heath and mires in good condition, Molinia undergrazed	TB restrictions preventing cattle grazing, sheep grazing in autumn may be too high
	East Anstey	56	7/12/00	Heath in good condition, but grazing levels a bit high	Address grazing levels through new moorland management plan being prepared this year

Appendix 2: Condition assessment of Exmoor National Park Authority land – woodland SSSIs

Condition	Unit	Area (ha)	Date of survey	Issues	Work done since survey
UNFAVOURABLE DECLINING	Hinam/Brewers Castle	46	05/10/04	Beech regeneration under oak canopy, in replanted area and along river corridor	Beech control of regeneration, and semi-mature trees throughout. Natural regeneration of oak released from beech
	Great Birch Cleave Wood	23	21/01/03	Deer grazing and browsing; beech invasion; no regeneration of oak or ash.	Beech control of regeneration, and semi-mature trees throughout.
UNFAVOURABLE NO CHANGE	Tarr Wood/North Barton Wood	34	04/10/04	Spread of beech saplings	Extensive beech control and thinning of canopy
UNFAVOURABLE RECOVERING	North Barton Meadow	2	25/03/04	Some scrub and bracken control; re-establishment of grazing desirable	Continued scrub and bracken control
	Ashwayside	6	07/03/02	Wood small part of heathland unit; high deer/livestock grazing?	Ex-common so fencing is not an option. Heathland grazing levels agreed in ESA moorland man. plan
	Burridge/Paddens/Weir Cleave Woods	30	07/03/02	Extensive rhododendron control carried out but more needed	Continued beech, holly and Rhododendron. control. Gap creation and thinning
	Hawkcombe Woods	83	08/10/04	Planned work should address main problems but deer browsing still an issue	Beech control, thinning and established coppice plots
FAVOURABLE	West Hollowcombe Wood	15	22/12/99		Beech control and thinning