

EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

26 APRIL 2005

THE EXMOOR MOORLAND INITIATIVE 2005

Report of the Head of Conservation and Land Management

Purpose of Report:

To update the Authority on progress with the Exmoor Moorland Initiative since the last report on 16 November 2004, to invite agreement to the approach outlined and to nominate three Members to sit on the Exmoor Moorland Initiative Board which will guide the future development of the initiative.

Legal Implications including Human Rights Act 1998:

None anticipated

Financial Implications:

None (An allocation for this Initiative is included in the 2005/06 Revenue Budget)

National Park Purposes:

This Initiative is intended to help further all National Park purposes.

RECOMMENDATION:

- To:-
- i) NOTE progress with the Exmoor Moorland Initiative;
 - ii) AGREE the approach outlined in the report, including the setting up of an Exmoor Moorland Initiative Board; and
 - iii) NOMINATE three Members to serve on the Board.
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1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 A report at the meeting of the Authority held on 16 November 2004 set out the background to this Initiative and, in particular, outlined the results of the work that had been carried out during 2004. This "Golden Jubilee Moorland Review" culminated in the Exmoor Moorland Seminar held at Lynton Town Hall on 19 October 2004. The key element was the publication by the Exmoor Society of the report *Exmoor Moorlands at a Crossroads – the state of the moorlands 2004* that it had commissioned from Land Use Consultants.
- 1.2 Since then steady progress has been made and the approach has been developed in the light of discussions with partners. Two key principles have guided the Authority's work to date. First that the Initiative should, in the current jargon, be "outcome focussed" – that it should make a difference "on the ground", not only in terms of the condition of Exmoor's moorlands but also in the way that they contribute to the well-being of those who own, manage and enjoy these areas. Secondly, that those who manage the moorlands should be fully engaged in the process.
- 1.3 One of the recommendations in the previous report was that the Authority should seek funding for the appointment of a Moorland Co-ordinator. Following detailed discussions with key partners this idea is not currently being pursued. It is felt that, particularly at this time when new rural delivery arrangements and the new integrated agency – Natural England - are developing, it would be more efficient and effective to utilising the existing expertise available in various bodies, "re-brigading" these resources and underpinning them with external help for specific aspects of the Initiative as necessary. (The appointment of a

consultant to help in the preparation of Moorland Management Plans (see below) is an early example of this approach).

- 1.4 This report outlines some of the key strands of current Moorland Initiative effort).

2. **MOORLAND MANAGEMENT PLANS**

- 2.1 A Moorland Management Plan is required for all moorland areas included within the Exmoor Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme. The Plans are prepared by the Rural Development Service (RDS) of the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in partnership with the agreement holder and with English Nature and the Authority. As most of Exmoor's moorland is covered by agreements under this scheme one focus of current activity has been to speed up the preparation of these Plans and to ensure that they are as comprehensive and realistic as possible.
- 2.2 In partnership with the RDS and English Nature, the Authority has provided financial support to enable the appointment of a consultant to prepare Moorland Management Plans. Officers of the Authority are also preparing Plans for certain moorland areas. The Countryside Agency is looking at how the Plans can be more comprehensive and better reflect landscape, access and other considerations. This approach is seen as a model for future working arrangements between National Park Authorities and the emerging integrated agency.
- 2.3 It is planned that all moorland within the ESA scheme will be covered by Moorland Management Plans by the end of the summer. Once these plans are in place the Authority will offer to prepare similar Moorland Management Plans for areas that are not currently within the ESA scheme. Once all the Plans are complete it will be possible to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the work identified within them to look at whether there are more effective ways of achieving the desired outcomes – whether through partnership working to achieve economies of scale, better programming, training, equipment rings and the like – rather than simply leaving it to the agreement holder to deliver.
- 2.4 The Farm Environment Plans that are required under the Higher Level of the new Environmental Stewardship Scheme (which will replace the ESA and Countryside Stewardship) will inform the Moorland Management Plans which will still be required. Members considered the Authority's role in the preparation of these Plans at their November 2004 meeting and officers of the Authority are already preparing a number of Plans on behalf of farmers and landowners including some for moorland areas.

3. **MOORLAND UNITS**

- 3.1 The Exmoor Society's report – "*Moorlands at a Crossroads*" – sub-divided Exmoor's moorlands into a number of "Moorland Units" and recommended that the Authority should establish the objectives and needs for each of the Units. Land Use Consultants recognised that the Unit boundaries they had used might need some refinement. Officers of the Authority have looked at these in detail and have now prepared an improved version that better reflects the topography and ownership pattern and also identifies the areas for potential expansion of moorland beyond the Unit boundaries.
- 3.2 A comprehensive database detailing ownership, key features of interest and issues for each of the moorland Units has now been compiled. This information will inform the preparation of Moorland Management Plans and future discussions with farmers/land managers.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF OPEN ACCESS UNDER THE COUNTRYSIDE AND RIGHTS OF WAY ACT

- 4.1 As Members know, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act has introduced a new right of access to open country. This will come into effect on Exmoor in 28 August 2005. Officers of the Authority, working in partnership with English Nature, have carried out a comprehensive assessment of the potential implications of this for the wildlife of Exmoor's moorlands. This has involved predicting the likely changes in the level and nature of access to moorland areas and assessing the impact this might have on the wildlife of these areas in order to identify measures that might be taken to minimise any potential adverse effects.
- 4.2 A similar process is now under way, in partnership with English Heritage, looking at the implications of open access on cultural heritage conservation.

5. THE MOORLAND LANDSCAPE

- 5.1 The Exmoor Society's report found that there has been little detailed assessment of the quality and condition of the landscape of Exmoor's moorlands. The authors concluded that "given the importance of the moorland landscape in terms of the National Park's designation and the value that many visitors and residents attach to the area, it is important this assessment is now undertaken."
- 5.2 The Exmoor Society has taken the lead in pursuing this recommendation with the establishment of a Landscape Group. One of its tasks will be to carry out assessments of the landscape condition of Exmoor, using the Countryside Agency's methodology, followed by wider public involvement. The Group aims to identify where action is needed and how resources should be prioritised in order to conserve and enhance the special qualities of Exmoor and will focus initially on moorland areas. This work could help inform the review of the National Park Management Plan and the preparation of individual Moorland Management Plans. The Authority's Landscape Architect, Sarah Bryan, is a member of the Group.

6. OTHER PROJECTS AND PROGRAMMES

- 6.1 The Authority is actively involved in a large number of other moorland projects and programmes most of which involve both survey and monitoring work as well as practical work on the ground, and all of which are developed in partnership with a wide range of bodies. Some notable examples include:
- the MIRE Project – restoring blanket bogs on Exmoor in partnership with the Environment Agency and English Nature;
 - the Two Moors Fritillary Initiative – conserving rare and vulnerable butterflies through practical management work in partnership with Dartmoor National Park Authority, English Nature and Butterfly Conservation;
 - The Merlin/Ring Ouzel project – seeking to conserve these threatened moorland birds, in partnership with the RSPB;
 - The Moorland Moor – a demonstration moorland management project co-ordinated by the Heather Trust on behalf of Defra;
 - The Warren Moorland Restoration Project – being carried out by one of the NPA's tenants in partnership with English Nature and the RDS;

- Moorland Monuments at Risk Study – looking at the condition of scheduled monuments on Exmoor moorland and the management measures needed, in partnership with English Heritage;
- Exmoor and Quantock Fire Partnership – co-ordinating the management of moorland burning in partnership with the Somerset Fire Brigade, Devon Fire and Rescue Service, Quantocks AONB service; English Nature and the National Trust;
- The installation by the National Trust of cattle grids on the A39 near Countisbury to facilitate the management of coastal health, funded by the Trust, English Nature and the NPA;
- Work to promote the conservation of purebred Exmoor ponies including a new pony video being produced by the Exmoor Pony Society, the proposed Exmoor Pony Centre being developed by the Moorland Mousie Trust (both projects funded through the Authority's Sustainable Development Fund and the management of the NPA's own herds.)

As well as the innumerable moorland management tasks being carried out on the NPA's moorland estate (including the moorland restoration work at Haddon Hill) and that staff of the Authority help others deliver (such the moorland burning programme and practical work at Alcombe Common, Minehead).

- 6.2 How to ensure that the results of all these projects and programmes, and particularly the practical lessons learned, are effectively disseminated to a wider audience will be one of the priority considerations of the Moorland Initiative. A summary schedule of current initiatives is in preparation and will be distributed to all those on the mailing list from last year's Exmoor Moorland Seminar along with an invitation to the Exmoor Moorland Forum 2005 (see below).

7. **SEEKING CONSENSUS**

- 7.1 One of the key overall findings of the Exmoor Society's moorland study was that, "despite the range of statutory designations and initiatives that have focused on the moorlands for the last 50 years, there is a lack of consensus between the different interests on what the future objectives of managing the moorlands should be. It is difficult to see how progress can be made towards improving the condition of the moorlands without agreement between all the parties who will need to be involved to bring this about. Ways need to be found to create clarity of purpose that is widely understood and accepted. If the moorlands are to continue to be managed by grazing and if the knowledge and traditions held by moorland farmers are to continue to form part of the culture of Exmoor, it is particularly important these farmers accept and feel part of a collective future."
- 7.2 What mechanisms should be put in place to help achieve this consensus and to develop a co-operative approach to managing Exmoor's moorland is a key issue for the Moorland Initiative. As a first step towards this it is suggested that there should be an annual Exmoor Moorland Forum and that an Exmoor Moorland Owners Group and an Exmoor Moorland Initiative Board should be established. The existing Moorland Forum would no longer meet but discussions would be held with the NFU and with RDS on how to avoid overlaps with the work of the NFU Hill Farming Committee and the ESA Agreement Holders meeting – particularly as the move to Environmental Stewardship, and the development of the new Integrated Agency – Natural England, progresses.
- 7.3 Officers are exploring the possibility of using the Open Strategy™ approach as a way of engaging stakeholders more effectively in the Moorland Initiative. A seminar on this new way of working with others to achieve better outcomes and "liberate collective wisdom" was held at Exmoor House on 23 March 2005. Several Members attended.

8. EXMOOR MOORLAND FORUM

- 8.1 About 130 people attended the Moorland Seminar held on 19 October 2004. Many people commented on the enthusiasm and commitment of the participants – particularly in the workshop sessions – and the value of the information exchanged. A consistent message in the feedback received was that it was a very worthwhile occasion, worth repeating. It is therefore suggested that there should be an annual Exmoor Moorland Forum that would be held on or about the anniversary date of the designation of Exmoor as a National Park and which would bring together all those with an interest in Exmoor's moorland to exchange information and help build strong and effective working relationships. The typical agenda would include some talks on topical issues plus workshop sessions and there would be poster displays and an opportunity to exchange literature.
- 8.2 It is proposed that the Exmoor Moorland Forum 2005 would be held on **Friday 21 October 2005** at Porlock Village Hall.

9. EXMOOR MOORLAND OWNERS GROUP

- 9.1 There is a relatively small number of people and organisations that own most of the moorland of Exmoor. Their objectives, aspirations and needs are key factors in determining the future of the moorland areas. It is suggested that, as one of the major moorland owners, the NPA should invite the other owners to meet to explore areas of mutual interest and to see whether there is support for such a group to meet on a regular basis.
- 9.2 The Moorland Owners Group would be invited to nominate two representatives to be members of the Exmoor Moorland Initiative Board.

10. EXMOOR MOORLAND INITIATIVE BOARD

- 10.1 It is proposed that an Exmoor Moorland Initiative Board is set up to guide the development of the Moorland Initiative. The Board would have representatives of the National Park Authority (3); the Exmoor Moorland Owners Group (2); The National Farmers Union (2); the Exmoor Society (1); RSPB/Wildlife Trusts (1) the Exmoor Trust; (1) and Defra (1) plus others as appropriate.
- 10.2 The Board would have a key role in steering the Initiative, including organising the annual Forum.
- 10.3 It is further proposed that three Authority Members are nominated to serve on the Exmoor Moorland Initiative Board and that, after the meeting, they agree a date for a meeting.

11. NEXT STEPS

- 11.1 If Members agree these proposals, a letter will be sent to all those who attended the Exmoor Moorland Seminar 2004, plus others with an interest in moorland matters, outlining the approach being pursued and inviting them to the Exmoor Moorland Forum 2005.

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Background papers on which this report, or an important part of it are based, constitute the list of background papers required by Section 100 D (1) of the Local Government Act 1972 to be open to members of the public comprise:-

Land Use Consultants (2004) Moorlands at a Crossroads – the state of the moorlands of Exmoor 2004 A report for the Exmoor Society.