What is Exmoor like?

Exmoor National Park is situated in the counties of Devon and Somerset in South West England; Exeter is 40 km (30 miles) to the south and Taunton 20 km (13 miles) from the eastern boundary. The National Park contains a variety of magnificent landscapes. Although it is one of the smaller National Parks (693 sq km, 267 sq miles) the central plateau of open moorland is remote and spacious. To the north the moorland terminates in towering cliffs above the Bristol Channel. Rocky headlands, steep wooded ravines, plunging waterfalls and jumbled heaps of fallen rock make this an area of outstanding scenic beauty. It is defined as a Heritage Coast.

Inland, the grass moorland is surrounded by heather-clad rounded hills mostly over 300 m (900 ft). Dunkery Beacon is the highest point on Exmoor at 519 m (1704 ft). This high land catches clouds from the Atlantic with rainfall up to 2000 mm (80 ins) a year and forms a catchment area for numerous rivers and streams which flow rapidly to the north and more gently to the south. It is not surprising that the moor is named after its main river, the River Exe. The moorland is dissected by combes (steep little valleys) formed by these fast-running streams.

To the east lie the cultivated Brendon Hills, heavily forested in the north but with enclosed fields surrounded by banks and fine beech hedges to the south. This typical landscape extends right across the south western lower slopes of the moor. It is farmed mainly with beef cattle and sheep but there is some arable farming on the dry northern slopes.

Who owns Exmoor?

Exmoor is a National Park but it is not owned by the nation. A number of independent and public organisations own land although about three-quarters of Exmoor is in private hands. The largest landowner is the National Trust, which owns over 10% of Exmoor, including estates on Winsford Hill and at Holnicote, Greenaleigh, Heddon Valley and Watersmeet. Next comes the National Park Authority, which owns about 7%. The Forestry Commission and Crown Estates own much woodland and Water Companies own land around reservoirs. The Valley of Rocks and Hollerday Hill belong to Lynton Town Council while Minehead Town Council owns Alcombe Common. The largest private landowner is the Badgworthy Land Company, which represents hunting interests. There are some large estates but most of the private land is comprised of smaller properties.
Who lives where?

The pattern of settlement on Exmoor has been dictated by the nature of the landscape and reflects 6000 years of human occupation and economic activity. Poor soil, inhospitable climate, inaccessibility and lack of shelter on the higher moorland have discouraged people from living on the highest ground.

There are no large towns within the National Park although most of the population live within reach of urban centres just outside the boundary eg. Minehead, Taunton, South Molton, Tiverton and Barnstaple. Nearly half of Exmoor’s population is concentrated in the three small towns of Porlock, Dulverton and Lynton, which act as rural centres for employment and services. The remainder live in small villages or in the scattered hamlets and isolated farmhouses which grew up below the spring lines where there was a supply of fresh water and a living to be made from the land. Exmoor villages were once self-sufficient and until quite recently most retained shop, post office, church, school and pub and provided much of their own entertainment. These services are still needed but many changes threaten the traditional life of the small village:

- Although the overall population has increased there are fewer jobs in the locality. Many young people have moved away in search of work while older people have been attracted to the area for their retirement. An ageing population means fewer children and some small schools have been closed.
- People now choose to shop in the larger towns where there is more choice. They use their local shop only for ‘topping-up’ and this loss of trade has forced many small shops and post offices to close. In some villages it is only the tourist’s needs that keep shops and pubs open.
- Wealthier people from other parts of the country have bought up properties as homes, second homes or just for investment. Their demand has pushed up prices to a level that young local first-time buyers cannot afford. This forces them to live off Exmoor and travel back for work whilst some wealthy residents commute to the cities. Some second homes stand empty for most of the year and their owners may do little to contribute to the economic or social life of the resident community. This is common throughout rural England.
- People moving to the area often take an active part in village life, however, sometimes their ideals do not match traditional ways.
Getting about

Bus services over Exmoor (apart from school buses) have always been infrequent and, although most villages are linked with towns by a weekly bus, for most families a car is essential. When people become too old or infirm to drive they often have to leave. Sometimes each adult in a family owns a car because they need to travel to work or college individually. These vehicles, together with those of visitors, contribute to congestion on Exmoor’s narrow, winding roads. The opening of the North Devon Link Road to the south-west of Exmoor has reduced through traffic which previously used the main roads in the National Park and the overall amount of traffic has not increased in recent years.

There are main line railway stations at Taunton, Tiverton and Exeter with a link from Barnstaple. The West Somerset Railway from Minehead is a privately run line which does not yet connect with the national network. There are airports at Bristol and Exeter.

Profile of some of Exmoor Parishes (based on 2001 census returns for parishes, and information current 2005)

* Over 60 years old national average 20.9% (2001)    ** Second/holiday homes national average 0.7% (2001)

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Exmoor’s main road network

Photograph - W S Atkins
Who does what?

Most of the people who work on Exmoor have jobs in agriculture, forestry, tourism or other service industries. There are no jobs mining these days and those employed in quarrying work outside of the National Park. For over a century there has been a gradual change and decline in the number of people employed in Exmoor’s traditional occupation, agriculture. As a result many people have looked for jobs outside the National Park or turned to providing services such as shops, petrol stations, accommodation or restaurants which rely heavily on tourists to make them viable. Because of the increasing number of old and infirm people in the area, social work is an increasing occupation and, if the trends continue, by the next census there will be more health and social workers than farmers living in the National Park. However, the National Park means more jobs in conservation land management and young people who may otherwise have taken jobs in agriculture are now taking such jobs.

Table showing employment of Exmoor residents 1971 - 2001 (as % of working population)

These figures do not show employment of people living outside the National Park and working inside it

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Exmoor Facts

Area: 69,280 hectares (171,189 acres), (267 sq miles)
Counties covered: Somerset 71%, Devon 29%
9,455 9,994 10,494 10,873
Main settlements: population by parish (1991)
Lynton and Lynmouth (1,658)
Dulverton (1,195)
Porlock (1,332)
Dunster (557)
Geology: main rock types
Old and new red sandstones, Devonian slates, shales and limestone
Highest point
Dunkery Beacon 519 m (1,704 ft)
Highest cliff (as in the Guinness Book of Records)
Great Hangman 244 m (800 ft)
Length of coast
55 kilometres (34 miles)
Length of main rivers from source to sea:
flowing to the English Channel
Exe 86 km (54 miles), Barle, via Exe: 86 km (54 miles)
flowing to the Atlantic
Bray, via Taw 62 km (39 miles)
Mole, via Taw 62 km (39 miles)
flowing to the Bristol Channel
East Lyn/Oare Water/Weir Water 16 km (10 miles)
Washford River 14 km (9 miles)
Avill 13 km (8 miles)
Horner Water/Chetsford Water: 13 km (8 miles)
Aller Brook 8 km (5 miles)
Heddon 8 km (5 miles)
West Lyn 8 km (5 miles)
Umber 5 km (3 miles)