

Exmoor National Park Authority
Food Farming and Land Management Panel

Report on Exmoor Moorland Seminar

Lynton Town Hall

19 October 2004

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report has been prepared at the request of Graham Wills of the Exmoor National Park Authority. It focuses on the afternoon discussion groups and key points made by the final speakers (Professor Michael Winter and Nigel Stone).
- 1.2 Seminar participants were divided into three discussion groups in order to address two topics: “the value, significance and condition of moorlands” and “actions to secure a sustainable future for Exmoor’s moorlands”. In each case a group rapporteur was asked to report on 3 key points. Whilst the stipulation of 3 key points was arbitrary (and largely driven by time constraints) it was nevertheless a useful exercise in priority setting and exploring consensus.

2. Workshop 1: The value, significance and condition of the moorlands

- 2.1 The ‘top 3’ points from each discussion group are listed below. These reveal some interesting similarities, particularly in the sense that while moorland is undoubtedly important, it is the whole landscape mosaic that is highly valued.

Table 1: Value, significance and condition of the moorlands

- 1. The landscape of Exmoor is valued as it is.
 - 2. There is an overall conservatism about change: if things change we may not like it.
 - 3. The activities of agriculture/tourism are important as a base for Exmoor community.
-
- 1. The value of diversity in the landscape, between different moorland areas, between different species, and aesthetically in its views.
 - 2. Exmoor exists beyond its boundaries and is of significance to a greater population.
 - 3. People and farming should be valued particularly for their intimate knowledge of farming and moorland life.
-
- 1. Too much bracken/mollinia in a mess, too much scrub/gorse
 - 2. Value depends on who you ask
 - 3. It’s not just moorland but the whole landscape & it’s value/significance changes over time

- 2.1.2 The more detailed discussions and comments from the workshop groups also revealed some other important themes. Importantly, there was recognition of the need for a debate and a mechanism to reach agreement around the type of landscape/environment that is desired. There was some agreement that identifying the acceptable limits of change is difficult:

“Communities living and working in the landscape create changes. Decisions must be made as to whether changes in favour of society should be allowed at the cost of landscape”.

- 2.1.3 Other, similar, comments included:

“Are we looking to preserve Exmoor or allow it move with the times?”

“Exmoor today is vastly different to 50 years so what are we trying to achieve? Preservation or sustainable change?”

“Do we want a thriving economic landscape, a fossilised landscape or a dynamic landscape?”

2.1.4 Although some of the ‘top 3’ points appear to answer these questions (e.g. Exmoor is valued as it is for its diversity), there is at the very least a need to debate the limits of environmentally and socially acceptable change.

2.2 **Perception & terminology:** All of the groups agreed that when discussing the value & significance of moorland different ‘users’ have different perceptions (e.g. farmers, tourists, conservationists and environmentalists). For example, a key issue in terminology identified by one group is that ‘fit for use’ means different things to different people, and it is essential to find common ground between uses. This clearly has implications for developing a shared vision for the future (which all groups supported) although some thought that differences in opinion/perception were less marked than might be expected. One group felt that visitors “come to Exmoor to see Bracken and Rhododendron, whilst this conflicts with people who live and work there who see these species as encroaching.”

2.3 **Capturing economic value:** It was agreed that farming underpins the landscape which, in turn, is an important aspect of the local tourism industry but many farmers are not able to capture the value of tourism (i.e. much tourism spend goes to B&Bs, cafes, etc). FMD reinforced the value of the whole of Exmoor; of farmers producing the countryside and of the variation that needs to exist. Therefore, it is necessary to have the stock that produces the landscape which keeps tourists coming. One example of capturing the economic value of Exmoor’s environment is the Porlock Toll Road which receives large numbers of users generates income that can be used on the rest of the estate.

2.4 **Variety & diversity:** Exmoor is valued for its variety as well as spatial diversity: wild species of fauna and flora and the mosaics of landscape types that change from moor to moor and from moor to other vegetation types; domestic species of cattle, sheep and ponies again on individual moors and between the moor.

2.5 **Dangers of abandonment/understocking:** in terms of current value and conditions of moorland, all groups identified and discussed the issue of understocking and even possible abandonment. One group conceptualised it as a technical problem in terms of “payments, manpower and the ratio of land to stock” but also identified that “traditional management systems and tick problems stop farmers from grazing moorland”.

2.5.1 The exchange recorded below illustrates some of the issues connected to abandonment and demonstrates the interconnectedness of Exmoor’s farming systems, landscape/environment, economy and resident population:

“Farm animals are needed to manage the moorlands because without them they would scrub up and go wild.

So what? This could be a good thing.

Farm abandonment, as in France, could happen if scrubbing up is allowed, which would lead to losses in the population and the closure of other businesses such as cafes, *etc.*

In the 1920s, Exmoor was derelict and less people will come if stock is taken off the moor.

It is about habitat verses aesthetic quality.

Succession is natural – moor, gorse to trees – should it be fought?

Value is the biodiversity, mosaics and landscape.

Moorland has value in itself and there is a need to retain it. Re-wilding should occur elsewhere on less important land.

At what cost? If public policy and money is keeping the moorland as it is, where is the value in this?

There is choice; either work with it or work against it.”

2.5.2 Members of the same group also stated that:

Exmoor is open countryside. You can find quiet places and views. Visitors and people need to see distance to understand where you are in the landscape. Therefore, it needs to be farmed; grazed to maintain accessibility.

The moorland could lose this quality if not managed properly but this will need payment.

- 2.6 **Multi functionality:** although multifunctionality was not a word recorded by any of the discussion groups, several of their comments were describing what could be described as multifunctionality: “Landscape makes up all the constituent parts, i.e. biodiversity, archaeology, working land etc. Landscape is dependent on the society that live there and work there, creating a multi faceted working landscape. The landscape is part of making a living but also as a resource for archaeology, recreation, business opportunities and wildlife”.

3. **Workshop 2: Actions to secure a sustainable future for Exmoor’s moorlands**

- 3.1 As table 2 illustrates, there was also a significant degree of consensus between the three discussion groups regarding the actions to be taken to secure Exmoor’s moorlands. These revolve around the strategic and organisational approach required (e.g. achieving a shared vision and either an enlarged and restructured Moorland Forum or a federation of moorland groups) and more practical/technical land management issues such as the use of ponies and a greater local input into agri-environmental schemes.

Table 2: Actions for Exmoor’s moorlands

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Revamping the Moorland Forum including proactive farmers.2. Creating a common vision of all stakeholders regarding the future of Exmoor.3. More support and lobbying for farmers and rural communities on Exmoor.
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Use of ponies as part of integrated moorland grazing programme, supported by public funding to allow them to be managed by farmers.2. Moorland area groups for individual blocks that federate moorland management.3. Create common vision between the DEFRA family of organisations, to co-ordinate action.
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Need shared vision underpinned by good information base2. Targeted, flexible AES based on local knowledge3. Expanded and restructured Moorland Forum |
|--|

3.1.2 **New Moorland Forum:** although one group recommended disbanding the Moorland Forum, their alternative suggestion of a federation of moorland block action groups is little different from the ideas put forward by the other groups for a larger and restructured forum with separate action groups, technical groups, etc. There was some difference in opinion regarding who should be part of the new forum. One group suggested that “all groups need to get together to talk on a regular basis”, while others felt that a focus on farmers and land owners would be more appropriate. It was agreed however, that large groups do not always work and that they need to be broken down into smaller groups. While many issues need discussion and a central forum is necessary to get consensus, different groups should address different parts of moorland management. For example, one group suggested the development of a Moorland Forum Strategy Group along with sub-groups to deal with specific issues/areas. Another similar suggestion was for smaller sub-groups of 8-10 people feeding into a “mother group”. These sub-groups could be based around technical management themes or spatially based around different moorland blocks. It was also thought important to run seminars periodically to attract farmers who are not members of the moorland forum.

3.1.3 The discussion group that suggested the dismantling of the moorland forum argued “that groups don’t tend to produce anything constructive and often are just talking shops”. Instead, it was suggested that “If you can get people to buy into change then there may be a more positive response than with forced change.... Groups involved should be ‘self motivated’ and ‘self selecting’ Targets should be set for small groups that feed into larger groups.... Meetings should be action orientated....The people involved in the actual land management should be the people in the meetings to get things done. Each vegetation ‘block’ of moorland could have an action group, which act as a federation of moorland management.” These useful suggestions are not much different from the ideas about a revamped and restructured moorland forum.

3.1.4 **Significance of local knowledge and appropriate scale:** Linked to the importance of some form of Moorland Forum so that farmers, landowners and other stakeholders can share information and develop a proactive approach to land management, the importance of **capturing local knowledge** was an important issue to emerge in group discussions. An example was given of an inappropriate stocking rate that has/had been long adhered to despite being calculated at a ‘head office’ which had not taken local conditions and local knowledge into account. In this sense recognizing the importance of local knowledge and issues of **appropriate scale** are interconnected. One group discussed the implications of the new Environmental Stewardship scheme¹ stressing that it will be locally based and therefore (in principle) more flexible: “It may take a few years to bed down but targeting statements specific to Exmoor will provide flexibility in how we get to an outcome. Prescriptions need to be for individual moors as each moor is different and therefore need different prescriptions.” This attention to local variation means that the two-way flow of knowledge at an appropriate scale will be essential. Given the importance of scale, local knowledge and a more open and inclusive approach to agri-environmental knowledge it was surprising to learn that neither Exmoor farmers nor the Moorland Forum had been consulted on targeting statements, etc for Environmental Stewardship.

3.1.5 **Role of ponies:** Emblems are an important aspect of the ‘public face’ of conservation work on a national and international scale. Given that the importance and value of Exmoor extends well beyond the boundaries of the national park, the development of a well recognised emblem could provide a means for tapping into the environmental value of Exmoor. One

¹ Environmental Stewardship will be introduced in 2005 and will replace existing agri-environmental schemes.

group suggested that Exmoor ponies (or possibly red deer) would make a suitable emblem and are already used in a similar way in work with school children. Similarly, another group recorded the following points about Exmoor's ponies:

- Exmoor ponies may be looked upon as grazing animals and they are an important draw for tourists. They may maintain and improve the moorland as well as being a tourist attraction even though they don't provide a financial opportunity at present.
- The number of ponies is low, and therefore farmers may be eligible for a rare breeds payment.
- The ponies are more rare than pandas!

3.1.6 **Burning:** The issue of burning emerged in discussions about the current conditions of moorland as well as under the headlining of actions to be taken. The importance of burning as a management tool was well recognised by all concerned. However, some argued that the "Burning that is done is unstructured and therefore insignificant. This vital tool for sustaining the moorland has become so prescriptive and only allows for what the farmer wants to be burnt." One suggestion was the introduction of a burning supplement to incentivise conservation management burning. Burning on Exmoor is a complex and contested issue and could perhaps be best addressed through a renewed Moorland Forum.

4. **Concluding remarks (Professor Michael Winter)**

- 4.1 Need to consider how to get the message to a wider group of farmers/people not at the moorland seminar. An important outcome of the discussion groups is clear need to work together either in moorland forum or some other umbrella group.
- 4.2 The countryside is a by-product of past agricultural systems and is not valued in the marketplace. Therefore there is a cost to be met in maintaining the countryside in the light of agricultural change. However, **rather than thinking in terms of endangered Exmoor we need an engaged Exmoor. This will involve the development of local solutions that look after Exmoor and the people of Exmoor.**

5. **Nigel Stone: A way ahead**

- 5.1 The seminar was closed by Dr Nigel Stone, Exmoor National Park Officer. He identified that there are a lot of good things happening on Exmoor but that for various reasons the future is uncertain. The National Park Authority plays multiple roles e.g. liaison, established Moorland Forum to build relationships and work with others, provision of funding, role of ranger service, etc. In order to find a way forward it is vital that the National Park Authority, farmers and landowners, who know more about moorland than others do, take control back to Exmoor. This will require developing a common vision.

6. **Conclusions**

- 6.1 The moorland seminar attracted a large, lively and engaged audience that was clearly passionate about Exmoor's environment and Exmoor's moorland in particular. A number of clear themes emerged from the discussion groups these are:
- Shared recognition that agriculture underpins the landscape and, in turn, the landscape supports tourism
 - Perceived dangers of uncontrolled undergrazing or even abandonment
 - Value of diversity – between different moorland blocks and between moorland and other landscape/habitat types.

- The value of, and need to use, local knowledge
- Need for shared vision
- Need participative and integrative processes
- Importance of a expanded and restructured Moorland Forum

Matt Lobley
University of Exeter, 17 November 2004