

Green Gateway: Linking Devon's Culm Grassland and the rural economy

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Ruby Country – a project promoting sustainable rural development based around tourism & recreation, named in honour of the traditional breed of ruby red Devon cattle.

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The Culm Measures are the rocks of North & West Devon which produce heavy, poorly draining clay soils.

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Culm Grassland (known as Rhos Pasture where it occurs in Wales and as Purple Moor grass-rush pasture in the UK BAP) is a mixture of wet heath, rush pasture, fen meadow, mire & scrub. In Winter it is dominated by purple moor grass *Molinia caerulea*. Traditionally some farmers managed these grasslands by Winter burning.

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In Summer the Culm Grasslands are rich in wildflowers, including the ragged robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi* and meadow thistle *Cirsium dissectum* seen in the foreground here.

At the end of WWII there was a great deal of this type of grassland but it was not much valued/recognised. Extensive post-war destruction was mostly driven by agricultural subsidies, especially during the 1960s and 1970s.

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DWT set up the Wildlife Sites Advisory Service to work towards meeting the Devon LBAP targets. Together with partners, it aimed for protective management of Culm Grassland sites. The area was covered by the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) pilot in 1992.

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Culm Connections is a newsletter produced 2-3 times per year. It raises the profile of Culm Grasslands and covers:

- management issues
- landowner profiles
- Wildlife features
- grant information
- how to get advice

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The projects was successful. Some reasons for this:

- Survey data – from the field survey, the project not only had reliable botanical data but also a database of contact details for every Culm Wildlife Site owner;
- Free advice enables proactive targeting. Many farmers would not be in CSS without the free DWT advisory service.

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Despite the successes of the advisory service, a problem remained: site protection so far is dependent upon agri-environment schemes and the fate of Culm Grassland is still tied to subsidised livestock farming.

Funding for continued advisory work on agri-environment schemes was not renewed; new proposals were developed to focus on training and farm tourism.

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To help farmers who manage their Culm Grassland well to achieve a premium price, a test mailshot went to DWT members who could buy 'beef boxes' by mail order.

Good publicity followed but sales were slow to build up. It proved difficult to obtain a premium price for supporting traditional breeds or nature conservation objectives.

There is potential consumer confusion with organic meat. The project lost momentum.

Market research – F3 Foundation for Local Food Initiatives.

Feasibility study, partnership with English Nature.

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Farm tourism is unique: tourists spend money on transport, accommodation, etc. They come to a place BECAUSE of the environment – landscape, culture, wildlife, etc – created by farmers. Farm tourism businesses are the only tourism businesses that help to create the thing that attracts people.

The Green Gateway project aims to market, to a niche audience, farm tourism businesses who manage the farm well for wildlife.

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Some farmers, finding their farm visitors lacked the confidence to explore the farm at will, have produced farm trails to encourage access.

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Farmers do not always know how to see their environmental assets from the point of view of a visitor.

The project obtained funding to expand training for farmers in tourism and farm shops. A wide range of landowners took part, investigating new ideas, considering case studies etc.

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Holsworthy and Hatherleigh are in the centre of an area which was badly hit by BSE and Foot & Mouth Disease. Many tourists pass it on the A30.

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Do the methods (target mainstream farmers; use wildlife credentials to add value) of the Green Gateway work?

The project has coincided with Foot & Mouth Disease, so it is difficult to interpret the results. Through the 1st year of the training initiative we have already influenced the managers of:

- almost 1500Ha of land
- two Sites of Special Scientific Interest
- nine County Wildlife Sites.

It is possible that these techniques can add value to existing enterprises but it is not clear if there is a limit to the number of farms which can successfully use the approach.

Amongst the project's strengths:

- Enables farms tourism business to exploit their natural assets
- Enables access
- Generates enthusiasm
- Changes outlook (use of case studies – hypothetical farms)
- New money for training – spreads experience to other farms
- Diverse range of landowners became involved
- Developed communication skills

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The project has proved vulnerable to changes in the funding climate – for example it was necessary to switch from pro-active advisory work to training, in the process old clients were left without the advice and support they had previously enjoyed from the project.

Ruby Country:

- finding a mechanism for re-investing in conservation
- lack of infrastructure in this isolated rural area

Lack of entrepreneurial lead

- DWT is not an organisation with entrepreneurial expertise, and so may not have chosen to target the easiest geographic area (i.e. the habitat is low-profile and difficult to promote); themes (including farm tourism, beef marketing, agri-environment schemes) could have been more focused.

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