

JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

A PURPLE PERSPECTIVE
Newsletter of the Lowland Heathland
Lead Co-ordination Network
Issue 2 : February 2007

What is the Lowland Heathland Lead Co-ordination network?

The Lowland Heathland Lead Co-ordination Network (LCN) is responsible for undertaking the 'special functions' of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) in relation to lowland heathlands. It also provides secretariat support for the UK Lowland Heathland Habitat Action Plan steering group. It involves specialist staff from all three country agencies, the Environment and Heritage Service (Northern Ireland) and the JNCC support unit.

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**Environment &
Heritage Service**
www.ehsni.gov.uk

1. Editorial

Welcome to the second newsletter of the Lowland Heathland Lead Co-ordination Network (LCN). Since the last issue there has been much change in England with the demise of English Nature and creation of Natural England by joining the strengths of English Nature and parts of the Rural Development Service and the Countryside Agency.

Although there were some teething problems with the matching of staff to posts, now that most staff have been confirmed in their posts or assigned new jobs, we hope we can continue our work, in this case advising on all aspects of the conservation of lowland heathlands. Also as a knock-on effect of funding problems in Defra there was a moratorium in autumn on spending which affected all projects not already underway in Natural England. However, the situation is improving and some small projects which were originally affected are now going ahead, to be finalised by the end of the financial year (see below project on soil impacts from heathland restoration).

Jan Sherry

2. News in brief

Consultation on the Heather and Grass Burning Regulations and Code

In 2003 English Nature stated that 24% of the area of those SSSIs in unfavourable condition was caused by inappropriate moor burning ("England's best wildlife and geological sites", ENRR 351, December 2003). Whilst in Wales CCW has identified burning as a factor contributing to unfavourable condition on 33 of 109 (30%) SSSI features assessed with a high degree of confidence (CCW Rapid Review data). It is therefore imperative that the problems of both illegal burning and inappropriate prescribed burning are tackled if the targets set by government for favourable condition on SSSIs and European sites are to be met.

The Heather and Grass Burning Regulations and Code have been under review in England And Wales since 2005. We are still awaiting the outcome of the consultation exercises completed last year to see whether any changes to the Regulations will be brought forward.

Currently Defra, with Natural England's assistance, is developing definitions of bad burning and drafting a new Burning Code, aiming to have it ready by April 2007. In Wales CCW is working with the Welsh Assembly to develop a revised Burning Code.

Scotland has its own Muir Burning Code, which is being reviewed. Existing dates for burning land below 450m (1500ft) are between 1st October and 15th April inclusive. (The Muirburn Code, available from the Scottish Executive ISBN 0 7559 1004 4)

Jan Sherry

Non-statutory heathlands sample survey in England

The project aimed to provide baseline information on condition and extent of a sample of non-statutory (i.e. non SSSI) lowland heathland sites throughout England, both inside and outside of agri-environment agreements. These records will complement those for statutory heathland sites, and both will be used to monitor the achievement against the BAP targets.

The 104 heathland stands in the sample represented the full geographical spread of non-statutory heathland in England and sites were widely distributed from Land's End to Cumbria and Northumbria,.

Surveys were carried out between 21st September and 28th October 2005 and 12th May and 24th August 2006. An adapted version of the Common Standards Monitoring Condition Assessment methodology and field form was used. Stands were mapped, and then a pre-planned W-shaped walk was made, with 20 stops at regularly spaced intervals, at which a range of structural and species compositional attributes were recorded, and then assessed against set targets.

No stand passed all attribute targets, and hence no stand can be considered to be in favourable condition. The results show that there were relatively low pass rates for a full range of attribute targets. A concerning number of dry stands (41%) failed to even meet the basic target of 25-90% cover of dwarf shrubs, and many failed targets for cover of such species as bramble *Rubus* spp, bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* and other negative indicators.

In considering the reasons for condition failure, the report concluded that the application of rigid statutory targets may not be wholly appropriate for non-statutory stands, particularly given the huge variety of heathland types within the sample, and the broad inclusion criteria. The report also considered the appropriateness of the attributes and targets themselves. Recommendations for further review of the standard condition assessment methodology were made, together with recommendations for further monitoring work and improvements to the habitat inventories.

The final report will be available from Natural England in March 2007.

Isabel Alonso

Grazing Animals Project (GAP)

The establishment of PONT (Pori, Natur a Threftadaeth - Grazing, Nature and Heritage) has put GAP firmly on the map in Wales. Charles Morgan formerly of the Brecknock Wildlife Trust was appointed Local Grazing Scheme (LGS) Wales Co-ordinator in summer 2006. A key aim for Charles is to develop and support existing and new grazing schemes throughout Wales.

In September PONT, in partnership with the National Trust and ADAS, held a seminar at the National Trust's Hafod y Llan farm holding in Eryri (Snowdonia) which looked at the constraints and opportunities of out wintering cattle in the Welsh uplands.

A one-day event entitled "How wild should Wales be?" was held by PONT during November. A series of presentations including a thought provoking talk from Peter Taylor, author of *Beyond Conservation*, was followed by lively discussion on different aspects of the "re-wilding" debate. The seminar was well supported with delegates from the farming, conservation and educational sectors from all parts of Wales attending. Charles can be contacted at PONT@grazinganimalsproject.info

Jan Sherry

GAP have also established in Northern Ireland with the project being led by the Ulster Wildlife Trust. A development plan has been formulated and meetings have been held by a steering group who represent the interests of Government Agencies, NGOs and Local Graziers. Geographical areas that require conservation grazing have been identified throughout Northern Ireland with a view to establishing local grazing schemes, these sites including SACs, ASSIs and sites of local nature conservation importance. A recent site visit took place at Brookend Nature Reserve, which is owned and managed by EHS, with a conservation grazing protocol drawn up to use for other similar sites within NI.

Alistair Church

3. Projects and reports

Coal spoil conservation in South Wales

The abandoned coal workings of the South Wales valleys provide a unique environment for a range of habitats some of which are restricted to the harsh, bare spoil environment such as the unusual and distinctive lichen-rich heaths and areas of open flower-rich vegetation. Where the spoil has a deeper covering of soil, grasslands, heather-dominated heaths and scrub habitats also develop. The spoil tips are also home to a range of species some of which are scarce or absent elsewhere in the valleys. These include butterflies such as the grayling, dark green fritillary, high brown fritillary, small pearl bordered fritillary and dingy skipper; birds such as linnet, skylark and stonechat and flowers such as grass vetchling *Lathyrus nissolia*, pearly everlasting *Anaphalis margaritacea*, ivy-leaved bellflower *Wahlenbergia hederacea* and small cudweed *Filago minima*. The environmental conditions required to produce the wealth of habitats and associated species are almost impossible to re-create as can be seen on a number of restoration schemes where the diverse habitats have been replaced by a monoculture of grass or scrub despite efforts to mimic existing habitats.

Despite the richness of these sites they are hugely undervalued and too often associated with perceptions of dereliction. To date little effort has been made to explain and interpret the wildlife interest of these sites or to improve recreational and educational facilities. LBAP partnerships in South Wales have developed Coal Spoil Habitat Action Plans which aim to encourage local conservation action. To help deliver local action on these sites a method of habitat assessment is needed which can allow for site appraisal in a South Wales context. In spring 2006 CCW commissioned a "Strategic Conservation Assessment Of Heathland and Associated Habitats on The Coal Spoils of South Wales" with the work being undertaken by Middlemarch Environmental Ltd.

Previous work has shown that coal spoil habitats do not fit well with the NVC. Communities are typically impoverished particularly with respect to higher plants but are often characterised by the abundance of lichens and bryophytes. An NVC data set alone is therefore insufficient to make an assessment of the value of the coal spoil habitats. Therefore a key aim of the project is to use the quadrat data collected during the mapping phase (and in any existing reports) to identify distinctive vegetation types and characteristic lichen and bryophyte species/assemblages which can be used to develop an assessment and evaluation methodology.

The aim of the study is to:

- i) Carry out detailed habitat mapping of coal spoil habitats on 15 sites.
- ii) Develop a simple methodology for assessing and evaluating coal spoil habitats and demonstrate the methodology by making a conservation assessment of the 15 sites.

The first field season is now completed and an initial analysis of the data has indicated that there are a number of plant species that are characteristic of coal spoil in addition to those mentioned above including fairy flax *Linum catharticum*, carline thistle *Carlina vulgaris*, the liverwort *Ptilidium ciliare*, and the cup-forming lichens *Cladonia portentosa* and *Cladonia cervicornis*. Middlemarch Environmental Ltd is continuing to develop the assessment methodology and will complete the GIS mapping of the sites over the winter. It is hoped that the methodology will be tested on additional sites next year and that a training day will be held for LBAP officers and volunteers so that the survey and assessment work can continue once the current funding has ended.

Jan Sherry

The potential for heathland restoration and re-creation techniques to cause deleterious impacts to the soil and the historic environment: A review

A new project will be underway in early 2007 to consider potential conflicts between heathland restoration techniques and soil conservation. This project will look at existing examples where top soil has been removed and/or where sulphur has been applied to acidify the soil and extract information from them (original situation/land use, restoration/re-creation objectives, depth of soil removed, disposal of soil, costs, problems encountered, results), compatibility of projects with the existing guidance and, in case of incompatibility how to mitigate the impact if the restoration/re-creation is otherwise advisable.

The project should be finalised by the end of March 2007, when a report will hopefully be made widely available.

Isabel Alonso

4. News from UK Lowland Heathland HAP Group

Northern Ireland meeting

In September the UK Lowland HAP Group met at Newcastle in County Down. A key theme of the meeting was the need to improve communication between the different levels of the BAP process and to clarify the roles and information requirements at the local, regional, national and HAP group levels. Whilst it is recognised that BAP is an essential driver for the UK Government to fulfil its commitment to biodiversity conservation, the link between strategic planning at the national and country level and planning and delivery at regional and local levels is not well synchronised - both within the BAP process itself and in combination with policy opportunities (e.g. securing BAP targets into Local Development Frameworks). The UK HAP groups' role within this process, beyond simple reporting, needs clarification. This requires better definition of the timescales for target development and data sharing and better understanding of the roles and capabilities of other parts of the BAP process.

A number of field trips were organised for the group, the first included a visit to look at degraded heath in a number of locations on the lower slopes of the Mourne, with Catherine Murphy, Mourne LBAP Officer. The second day was more management orientated, with David Thompson (National Trust) showing us the work they are doing on Murlough NNR in relation to scrub control and grazing on heathland. The final field visit involved visiting Royal County Down Golf Course to see the work they are undertaking on heathland management, especially re-creation of heathland areas. A good time was had by all, with the visits prompting much lively discussion, even in the wind and rain!

Sinead Mulvaney EHS

Extraordinary meeting of UK Lowland Heathland HAP Group

Following the discussion at the Northern Ireland meeting, an extraordinary meeting was held on 24th January 2007 in Peterborough involving representatives from all levels of the BAP process, from Defra to R/LBAPs, NGOs and staff from the country conservation agencies. The aim of the meeting was to establish mechanisms for improving communication and role definition within the BAP process using the Lowland Heathland as a model which if successful could be repeated for other HAPs and SAPs. The HAP group will report on the outcomes of the meeting in a future issue.

UK Lowland Heathland HAP targets review

The Lowland Heathland HAP group proposed new targets in April 2006 for maintaining extent and condition, improving condition and increasing extent of the UK lowland heathland resource, as well as increasing the size of heathland habitat patches. After consultation with other groups, the targets have been signed off and are now available at BARS (www.ukbap-reporting.org.uk; search for national and local BAP targets, then lowland heathland).

Isabel Alonso

5. Agri-environment schemes in Northern Ireland

Background to the Lowland Heathland Resource in Northern Ireland

Lowland heathlands in Northern Ireland are a relatively scarce resource with much of the lowland landscape being dominated by intensive pastoral agriculture and in more natural situations lowland raised bogs. There are scattered areas of lowland heathland associated with some of the fen systems in Counties Down and Armagh and these relicts of lowland heath have survived because of the difficulty in accessing heath interspersed with very wet fen habitat.

The main area of the lowland heathland resource is associated with the Ring of Gullion Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Ring of Gullion itself is one of the best examples of a ring dyke system in the British Isles. The heather clad bulk of Slieve Gullion (SAC, ASSI) mountain lies at the centre of the AONB, which takes its name from the encircling ring of lower rugged hills. The lower lying heathlands on the surrounding ring and the lower slopes of Slieve Gullion mainly correspond to the NVC community H8 *Calluna vulgaris* - *Ulex gallii* heath found in Great Britain. This type of lowland heathland is frequent on the east coast of Northern Ireland and around the lower slopes of the Mourne mountains.

The other really significant area of lowland heath is on Rathlin Island, where, the extensively managed lowland heath forms a mosaic with coastal heathland communities. The vegetation over much of the area is dominated by the sub-shrubs ling *Calluna vulgaris*, bell heather *Erica cinerea* and Western gorse *Ulex gallii*, which together form a distinctive dwarf-heath community. This vegetation type is restricted in its distribution within the UK, and Rathlin represents its most northerly known location. Maritime species such as sea pink *Armeria maritima*, sea plantain *Plantago maritima* and sea campion *Silene maritima* become more frequent in the vicinity of the cliff edge, where the peat soils are very thin and exposure reduces the vigour of the main heath species.

Alistair Church

Schemes available in Northern Ireland

Within Northern Ireland the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) operates two habitat based agri-environment schemes - the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme (ESA) and the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS).

The ESA scheme has been running since 1988 and is available within five areas of Northern Ireland with high landscape, historic and environmental value. The five areas are Mourne and Slieve Croob; Antrim Coast, Glens and Rathlin Island; Sperrins; Slieve Gullion; and the West Fermanagh and Erne Lakelands. The designated Environmentally Sensitive Areas cover 20% of the land area in Northern Ireland.

The CMS was introduced in 1999/2000 to cover all areas of Northern Ireland outside the five ESA areas enabling all farm businesses to participate in agri-environment schemes. From 1999/2000 both the CMS and ESA Schemes have operated with the same scheme prescriptions and payment rates. Both schemes are voluntary.

DARD agri-environment schemes are whole farm schemes and entry is conditional on a successful Farm Waste Management Audit. DARD staff complete the farm application process and draw up the scheme management agreement for the farm.

DARD agri-environment schemes provide a whole farm payment with additional payments for priority habitats such as species-rich grassland, breeding wader sites, woodland, scrub, heather moorland, rough moorland grazing, lowland raised bogs, parkland and ancient monuments. Payments are available for optional habitats and capital items including field boundary restoration, tree planting, watercourse margins, retention of winter stubble, wild bird cover and winter-feeding sites for swans and geese. A chough option is also available within the Antrim Coast, Glens and Rathlin ESA. Additional payments are available for bracken control and heather regeneration.

Priority and optional habitats, and the associated management prescriptions, have been aligned to the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Priority Habitat and Species Action Plans outlined in the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy.

The Queens University of Belfast independently analyses the impact of DARD agri-environment schemes and produces regular monitoring reports.

Heather moorland (includes lowland heath)

Within DARD agri-environment schemes heather moorland is sub-divided into dry heath, wet heath and blanket bog. Heather moorland must have a minimum of 25% cover of key indicator species; for example the dry heath indicator species are heather, bell heather, bilberry and western gorse.

On all heather moorland types grazing is not permitted from the beginning of November to the end of February. From the beginning of March to the end of October a stocking density is set according to the moorland type. For dry heath, 0.30 livestock units/ha are permitted which equates to 2 ewes/ha.

Drainage, reclamation, application of inorganic, organic manures, lime and pesticides (with exception of bracken and noxious weeds) and tree planting are not permitted. Peat extraction is limited to 0.10 ha for domestic use only and mechanical extraction is not permitted.

Successful uptake

Uptake of DARD agri-environment schemes to date has been very good with over 13,000 scheme agreements in place by end of 2006. This represents over 40% of the farmland within Northern Ireland; in some ESA areas such as West Fermanagh and Erne Lakelands uptake is as high as 70%.

DARD agri-environment schemes are now making a significant contribution to the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Action Plan targets for a range of habitats and species: for example over 44,000 ha of heather moorland, 17,500 ha of rough moorland grazing and 4,700 ha of lowland raised bogs are now under agri-environment scheme management agreement.

Further details of DARD agri-environment schemes can be obtained on the DARD website at www.dardni.gov.uk.

Godfrey McRoberts DARD

6. 9th National Heathland Conference, Aberdeen 8-10 August 2006, report

This year's conference was held in August at the University of Aberdeen with 84 delegates in attendance. The theme of the conference was Changing Landscapes, examining the impacts of climate change and pollutants on upland and lowland heathlands; looking at access to these environments and exploring increasing interest in landscape scale approaches to sustainable management and expansion of the heathland. The programme included key presentations, discussion groups, posters and field visits. The field visits were held at three nearby sites; Bennachie, which is transitional to upland heath and owned by the Forestry Commission, Red Moss of Netherley, a raised bog managed by Scottish Wildlife Trust, and Sands of Forvie, a coastal heath NNR managed by SNH. Everyone enjoyed these visits and had plenty of time to discuss the features and management of the sites. A cultural after-dinner stroll around 'Old Aberdeen' was expertly led by Charles Gimingham and Mark Young.

It is intended to make the presentations available electronically via the SNH website over the winter.

Thanks go to the organisers of the conference at SNH and to the very helpful staff at Expotel who helped rearrange travel plans for many people following the bomb scare at British airports.



Sands of Forvie
field trip

The next conference will be held in 2008 at York. Contact has already been made with local Natural England staff and York University.

Lynne Farrell

7. Forthcoming meetings

- 15-17 February 2007: Conference: Heathlands (A landscape at the mercy of man). Aulne Agricultural college, Brittany. (English and French translation) sylvie.vigouroux@pnr-armorique.fr
- 17 April 2007: Lowland Heathland HAP group meeting. Peterborough.
- 12-14 June 2007 FACT/GAP Conference, Stirling; Tools and Techniques for Pastoralism and Wild Lands
adam.cormack@grazinganimalsproject.info
- 25 June -1 July 2007 10th European Heathland Workshop. Norway.

8. LCN contacts

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