

**Minutes of the
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST**

1430, Monday 29 March 2010
Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present: Mr P Glyn (Chairman), Cllr J Barnes (*ex officio*), Cllr N Bennett, Mr M Cooper, Mr R Galley, Mr L Gillham, Mr C Hewitt (County Ecologist), Cllr M Hoy, Mr C Marrable (Conservation Officer), Dr H Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr R St Pierre, Mr E Stenhouse and Mr R Thornely-Taylor (*ex officio*).

Mr John Rich, a member of the public and secretary of the Deer Management Group, made a brief statement. He said the Deer Group were meeting on Tuesday 30 March 2010. He went on to say the Deer Group were unable to provide a solution to the deer problem and that the Board were part of any future solution. The Clerk replied that he agreed. Cllr Barnes said that a deer cull would be both desirable and inevitable, however, there were serious concerns regarding public safety that had yet to be resolved.

07/10 Apologies.

Apologies were received from Dr K Cole (County Ecologist), Mr J Harding (Forestry Commission), Ms C Laing (NE) and Mr J Spicer.

08/10 Declarations of Interest.

There was none.

09/10 The future of grazing on Ashdown Forest Heathland - CON 03/10

A list of headings had been circulated as agreed at the last meeting. There was a lengthy discussion that covered the issue of burning as a management tool, the role of the Forest Plan, and the following two points were raised for inclusion in the document:

- comments regarding the outcome of the Chailey public inquiry be included were appropriate.
- burning and other techniques, as a continuing part of the management cycle, be alluded to in the document.

10/10 Shepherded grazing feasibility project report (draft) - CON 04/10

The document had been circulated. The Chairman said it was very much a draft document with obvious errors and omissions. Mr Marrable said that there was no other organisation in the UK that was grazing exactly in the way the document described and there was a short discussion regarding cost comparisons with other grazing projects in different parts of the UK, with mechanical management and in terms of public relations. It was reiterated again that the report was not about which was the best form of management (grazing versus mechanical) but how grazing could be feasible in the future.

Cllr Barnes said that there was a danger of confusing three issues - cost comparisons with different methods of heathland management which were not within the remit of this report; future policy and cost per sheep should be a report in its own right. Making comparisons with lowland sheep would be an interesting exercise for the future.

The document was scrutinised page by page, bearing in mind it was a draft, and the following general points were highlighted for revision:

- The original project description and terms of reference should be included to give the report greater structure.
- The introductory summary to the report should be re-drafted to be punchier, dryer and tighter.
- Any value judgements and subjectivity regarding the project should be removed.

- There were a few lapses of accuracy that needed to be corrected.
- The language in the report was too 'journalistic' and would be improved by being more objective and 'tight'.
- Observations should, where possible, have supporting evidence.
- References should be corrected.
- The document was often forward looking rather than retrospective and a final chapter at the end of the document detailing the lessons learned and looking forward should be included.
- The 'core' of the report should include more specific information and hard evidence on what the sheep were observed to be eating and how grazing affects gorse and bracken. Illustrations on the Sheep Blog were highlighted as being excellent and would be useful.
- It was agreed that Mr Poole be approached to assist with the preparation of the financial element of the report.

The following specific points were highlighted for revision:

- On page 5, paragraph 4 supporting evidence was required.
- Illustrations should be appropriate to the scope of the project; those showing grazing in the Netherlands should be removed. (Although it could be included as an appendix).
- The list of sheep breeds was more appropriate as an appendix and, when referring to the sheep breeds, Charolais should be spelt Charollais.
- The section on 'Why Hebrideans', though interesting, might be more appropriate as an illustrative appendix. It could be more pertinent to say why other 'local' breeds such as Southdowns were not suitable for the Forest.
- On pages 17-18, last table shown, totals are needed. Numbers should be added to the map shown.
- The Working Time Directive should be alluded to in the section on hours worked and week-end working.
- On pages 22-23 a target of 100 days grazing was mentioned but its origin was not stated. It was agreed that this figure needed clarifying.
- On pages 25-26 the representation of data was incorrect
- It was thought difficult to pick out information on what could actually be achieved (sheep days/per hectare) on pages 27-28.
- Statements regarding annual leave on pages 29 - 30 should be quantified. This section was thought to be very interesting.
- The update on lambing should be added as an appendix.
- Page 40 needed fleshing out with hard data.

Winter grazing was discussed with some Committee members feeling that grazing should be attempted in the winter. Mr Marrable said that food availability and daylight hours were an issue. Mr Stenhouse said it should be tried. Mr Stenhouse also said the whole project was driven by high fertility rather than grazing and that excessive hours had been spent on the welfare of sheep renowned for their toughness. The Clerk and the Chairman both replied that breeding was the quickest way of increasing numbers and that had been the plan from day one. They also said that Miss Amos' care for the sheep was to be welcomed.

It was agreed that the report was full of heart, excellent information and was a descriptive portrayal of the day-to-day life of the shepherd. However, all agreed that since the report was eagerly awaited by other land managers it should reflect well on the Board, more work was required. The Chairman offered to assist Miss Amos, with the suggested revisions to the report.

Cllr Bennett said that the report was an internal one belonging to the project officer and that the Board should, in due course, write its own tougher over-arching report (based on and citing those compiled by the project officer) for the public and funders. It was agreed a succinct document that

was a distillation of lessons learned was required. It was agreed that Miss Amos should be the lead author.

The Chairman and the Committee wished to convey their gratitude to Miss Amos for her achievement, hard work and dedication in spite of adversity and some bad luck.

11/10 Verbal report on heathland restoration 2009/2010

Mr Marrable explained that all contract work had, despite the weather, been completed. Two contractors had been called back as there were issues regarding the standard of their work. More internal work, directed by the Rangers, had been completed than planned due to use of the Ahwi (the new flail). In-house work had more in built flexibility, however a rigid end date had been set this year (end of February for contractors due to the onset of spring). It was noted that first woodlarks were heard on 1 March! The Rangers will be holding a *post mortem* to discuss how the work went and how it can be managed better next year. He went on to say there had been 140 requests for wood permits this year, half from Commoners. He also reported that the planned control burn had been cancelled due to very poor weather in February. The Clerk reported that there were very few complaints about the winter work and, in fact, compliments had been received. The parish councils were complimentary and appreciative, possibly due to improved communications.

12/10 Verbal report on Chailey Inquiry

Mr Marrable reported that he, the Chairman and Ranger Rich Allum had attended the inquiry and he gave some background for the benefit of the Committee. East Sussex County Council had applied for fencing under the Commons Act 2006. There had been between 50-70 written representations to the Planning Inspectorate which led to the four day, very formal, public inquiry being called. Attending the meeting had been an invaluable learning experience. Over 30 witnesses had been called in both support and opposition to the plan. The meeting was attended by specialist consultants, including an expert on the Commons Act, road safety and grazing experts and legal representation as well as a disparate group of local residents and single interest opponents who had no legal assistance. The decision would be made in approximately two months.

Mr Marrable said it was very evident that, to produce a good solid case, very large scale financial resources would be required (£50 - £60,000). Solid experts and excellent legal representation with cross examining skills were essential.

Mr Marrable went on to say that despite much evidence being brought to the enquiry, nothing was mentioned regarding the effectiveness of grazing. It was, therefore, very important that cast-iron evidence on the effects grazing the Forest would be required and currently this was lacking even at national level.

13/10 Financial information for Conservation Committee responsibilities – CON 05/10

There were no questions or comments.

14/10 Any urgent item for which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the Chairman.

There were none.

The meeting closed at 1645.