

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

1430, Monday 17 January 2005

Ashdown Forest Centre

Present: Mr L. Gillham (Chairman), Mr M. Cooper (arrived 1510), Mr P. Glyn, Ms L. Hutchby (arrived 1440), Mr C. Marrable, Mr F. Marshall, Ms J. Mortimer (DEFRA), Dr H. Prendergast, Dr A. Tait (ESCC), Mrs J. Wirdnam, Dr A. Woodcock (ESCC)

In attendance: Mr F. Whetstone

Apologies: Mr F. Brown, Mr A. White

1) Welcome to Ms Mortimer, new DEFRA adviser

Mr Gillham extended a welcome to Ms Mortimer who is replacing Mr A. Macdonald.

2) Entomological surveys – 2004 and beyond

Mr Marrable reported that the survey work is complete and a full report will come later. On the ant survey, no conclusions have yet emerged other than a recommendation that the same format should be used for further work in 2005. The technique of using tiles might also be used on areas with known interventions, such as fire.

On the main survey, four entomologists have submitted data to Dr Mike Edwards, identifying > 1000 species. Mr Marrable said that the team has been very good and conscientious, and has gathered new base-line data in a way that has never been carried out before on heathland. On ants, Dr Tait mentioned the need for voucher specimens and suggested that surveys could be carried out in-house (confirmed by Mr Marrable but not always to species level) or by volunteers.

3) Mountain biking on the Forest – members' considered views

Dr Prendergast said that he has been in contact with various individuals and organisations about access to the Forest for mountain biking. He wanted to gauge the views of the Committee.

Mr Marrable thought that biking itself was conservation neutral, but introducing a new usage of the Forest would lead to unforeseeable impacts. He mentioned that, when mountain bikes first appeared, the Forest was 'invaded'. Dr Tait also highlighted the problem of biking

being an additional use of the Forest, and thought it detrimental to conservation because of the difficulty of controlling the numbers of bikes and the routes taken. The statutory duty of the Board was for people on foot. Of other places, he said that Box Hill was an example of where biking had caused substantial damage and that the (chalk) Downs are more resilient to impact than heathland. It was noted that on the New Forest, where extensive biking takes place, there are numerous gravel tracks. Furthermore, Dr Woodcock suggested that the 'lumps and bumps' that are attractive to bikers may also be archaeological features. Both Mr Gillham and Mr Marshall pointed out the problem of policing and of confining biking to particular areas. Ms Mortimer thought that numbers of bikers would never be known and that biking would not be manageable.

The Committee concluded that, although low level biking may not be a conservation issue, uncontrolled biking would be.

Finally, Dr Tait pointed out the difference between road and mountain biking. In referring to ESCC's policy of encouraging people to bike, he suggested that people might be encouraged to bike *to* the Forest and once here to have secure places to leave the bikes.

4) Hunting on the Forest – update and post the ban

Dr Prendergast mentioned the bad feeling that existed among Forest staff after an incident, that included a pony breaking its leg, on the Forest before Christmas involving the Old Surrey and Burstow Hunt. Letters were still being exchanged about the details of the incident. He asked the Committee about its views on allowing drag hunts on the Forest once the Hunting Act 2004 comes into place in February 2005. Mr Gillham reminded members that hunts are currently allowed to cross the Forest but not to meet or be in active pursuit. Mr Glyn said that drag hunts have smaller fields than fox hunts.

Dr Tait wondered why a drag hunt needs to cross the Forest if the route is pre-planned. In relation to conservation, at two drag hunts/year, he said that there was not a conservation issue but wondered whether the public would understand.

Mr Whetstone said that every activity attracts irresponsible as well as responsible people. The fact that the Coakham (drag) Hunt crossed the Forest in autumn 2004 without permission drew attention to the fact that all organised activities need permission, including those that merely cross the Forest. Mr Gillham said that it would hardly be logical to prevent drag hunts from crossing the Forest when fox hunts have historically been permitted to do so. He went on to say, however, that rules must be observed as with any other Forest users and that normal levels of courtesy should always be extended. He also confirmed that any review regarding drag hunts should ensure that the hunt riders do not have a financial advantage over riding permit holders. It was confirmed that hunts currently make a donation to the Conservators when they cross the Forest.

5) Pond restoration/parrots feather elimination at Ellisons

Dr Prendergast mentioned that work to remove parrots feather will start in the early summer. Dredging is the only answer, with a close watch kept for any plants left behind. Ms Mortimer confirmed that DEFRA will support this work and suggested that dredged

material could be left alongside the ponds initially to allow any animal life to re-enter them. Once it is removed further from the ponds, Ms Hutchby suggested covering up the dredged material with plastic to prevent regrowth. It was also suggested that some interpretation be installed to prevent people putting more plants (or fish, as has happened) back into the ponds. Mr Marrable said he was meeting the Environment Agency at Ellisons next week to look at the use of herbicides near water on the Forest and to obtain 'blanket' approval for it.

6) New DEFRA schemes – update

Ms Mortimer said that under the new 'rules' lowland heathland, as on the Forest, is not eligible for the Entry Level Scheme and that she would expect all the current Countryside Stewardship Schemes (CSS) on the Forest to enter the Higher Level Scheme (HLS) by October 2007. Any other land not under any CSS could also be added. Bidding for funds (these will be announced on 3 March 2005) from HLS is competitive and success will be based on the number of points achieved by applications with regard to meeting the objectives of HLS. The primary ones are: conservation of wildlife and biodiversity; maintenance, enhancement and protection of landscape quality and character; protection of the historic environment; protection of natural resources including soil and water; and promotion of public access. SSSIs will score highly under this system, as will bringing sites into English Nature's 'favourable condition' (through e.g. grazing). HLS requires the production of a plan to cover a 10 year period (although there is a get-out clause after five years), and inclusion of 'Indicators of success' such as the percentage areas, in given sites, of the amount of dwarf shrubs (like heathers) and bare ground.

In reply to a question from Mr Cooper, Ms Mortimer said that there would be no disadvantage to other sites from the Forest's having a large area.

Mr Marrable recommended no further use of any figure defining the extent or proportion of woodland and heathland on the Forest; there is great potential to expand heathland once HLS comes in. Mr Gillham reminded the Committee that the habitat 'divide' emerged at the time of the fencing of part of the Forest (in the 1990s) to allay public concerns about the cutting down of trees. Dr Tait added that the Forest was historically heathland but that its secondary woodland can still be old, even if not classified as Ancient. At Chailey all woodland is on the edges of the Common, screening development.

Mr Marrable thought that there was no way in which in-house resources could write up the sort of detailed plans needed for HLS. Ms Mortimer replied that an initial implementation plan may be needed and that funding could be obtained for a consultant. Ms Hutchby wondered at a possible EN contribution to costs of getting a plan done.

7) Action Plan 2005-2006 – Conservation: members' comments

Dr Prendergast asked for comments and additions to present to the Board at the last meeting of 2004/5. Mr Gillham asked whether new projects are affecting adversely other maintenance tasks on the Forest. Dr Prendergast hoped not and gave the example of the removal of litterbins from car parks as a way of freeing up staff time and commitment. Mr Gillham suggested comments are emailed in.

Mr Marshall mentioned the need to monitor the attrition of road verges on Kidds Hill.

8) AOB

Mr Glyn reported a suggestion to erect a sign by the road outside the Centre indicating deer casualties. Dr Prendergast said that general signage on the Forest was a far greater priority. After some discussion the Committee felt that the idea would have little impact.

To help reduce deer casualties Mr Whetstone and Mr Marshall suggested cutting trees back from road verges in woodland. Dr Prendergast replied that to do so would have a major impact on resources and Mr Marrable said that such work would involve changing the nature of the areas in question. He added, however, that mowing verges on the A22, adjacent to heathland, had made a positive impact.

Ms Hutchby reported that she had been discussing with Mr Marrable and the High Weald Unit (HWU) the idea of a 'stakeholder dialogue training day' to find the best way of telling the public about activities such as grazing, fencing, and felling trees. EN would fund such a day, while the HWU would organize it.

Dr Woodcock said that English Heritage was still considering the archaeological proposal about the Forest submitted to them last year.

The meeting finished at 1640.