

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

1400, Monday 12 January 2009
Hindleap car park then Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Mr P Glyn (Chairman), Mr M Cooper, Mr J Harding (Forestry Commission), Cllr M Hoy, Ms L Hutchby (NE), Mr C Marrable (Conservation Officer), Dr H Prendergast (Clerk), Mr J Spicer, Mr J Seymour (NE), Mr E Stenhouse, Dr A Tait (ESCC Ecologist).

Also present: Ms L Amos, Cllr J Barnes (*ex-officio*), Mr L Gillham (*ex-officio*) and Cllr F Whetstone.

There were no members of the public present.

1/09 Site visit to look at the results of various heathland restoration techniques.

The Committee met at Hindleap car park and visited the following areas:

- A bracken mowing site south west of the car park, mown the first year after stump removal.
- An area of bracken and scrub that will be flailed either this winter or next and brought into routine management.
- A bracken scrape carried out by Wakehurst in 1997 near Cripps Manor Drive.
- A corridor created over Cripps Manor Drive by limited tree felling, stump removal and landscaping.
- A bracken scrape carried out by Wakehurst in 2008 at Goat cross-roads, heather litter having been spread over half of the area so far. The Committee then returned to the car-park.

2/09 Apologies.

Apologies were received from Mr C Johnson (ESCC Archaeologist) and Cllr R St Pierre. The Chairman welcomed Ms Hutchby and Mr Seymour. He reported that Mrs Robertson had changed roles at NE and would no longer attend Conservation Committee meetings.

3/09 Declarations of Interest.

There was none.

4/09 Woodland Management Plan – CON 1/09.

The Woodland Management Plan had been circulated to the Committee in September 2008. The document under discussion had been pre-circulated. The Chairman asked if there were any questions.

4.1/09 Mr Stenhouse asked why there were no monetary values referred to in the text (2.2) and what any monetary value might be. He asked for evidence for the statement that there was no staff time available to administer Option 2. Mr Marrable replied that the additional planning, contract and project management tasks required considerable staff time that was not currently available. He added that monetary values were likely to be low and any income from wood sales would be a top-up and would not change the grants.

4.2/09 Mr Cooper commented that there were issues of judgement involved in the document (1.5) that made it difficult to inform stakeholders of the Committee's intentions. Mr Marrable responded that the objectives described were all desirable and additional to what already happens. There would be times when roadside trees, for example, could be handled in a way that cost more and took longer but achieved more pleasing results than the current fast, cheap but less pleasing method. Mr Glyn commented that there were value judgements that could not be priced or quantified and this was an accepted weakness in the plan. Dr Tait stated that any plan would inevitably be a mixture of the quantifiable and the aspirational and some issues would be clearer than others. 'Naturalness' was a clearly defined SSSI standard but 'improved internal landscape' was unquantifiable; however, it was important it was identified as a 'core' objective that could be implemented without necessarily increasing costs. He added that value

judgements were inescapable. Mr Glyn noted that the Woodland Management Plan (5.0) stated that some objectives could be “achievable if circumstances changed” and asked Mr Harding to comment; he said he knew of no planned Forestry Commission grant changes but a change in wood fuel prices could affect income generated.

4.3/09 The Clerk stated that, regarding stakeholders, this woodland management plan would be put into the public domain when financial and logistical conclusions were reached; the Strategic Forest Plan stated that a plan would be published. Mr Cooper noted that consultation would then be a challenge but that if any work was ‘significant’, he believed time should be taken to inform stakeholders and draw wider public attention to it.

4.4/09 Cllr Barnes asked if there were costs for a project manager or the marketable value of the wood. Mr Harding observed that the Plan estimated a harvest of 11,000m³ per year. Mr Marrable reported that full-time and part-time posts had been considered. There was a short discussion regarding the costs of using a contractor to extract and move wood to the roadsides versus the value of wood extracted. Mr Marrable was tasked with obtaining a cost of employing a manager for the Plan. Cllr Whetstone stated the Plan was not woodland but landscape management and Mr Harding replied that it was woodland being managed, not for timber production, but for landscape and amenity value. Dr Tait said the report identified work that could be done when resources were available. He added that woodland bird population was one of the bio-diversity indicators on which the UK was failing and was optimistic that there would later be additional funds for aspirational parts of the Plan.

4.5/09 Cllr Whetstone was concerned about ‘forest gateway’ creation (2.2) that might be seen as lavish in this recession. Mr Glyn said work would be done only as funds became available.

4.6/09 Mr Stenhouse commented that there was no information available to the public on trees to be felled and those to be retained.

It was agreed that the document CON 1/09 be recommended to the Board and that a price be sought for the administration of the full plan (option 2 in the document).

5/09 Résumé of legal framework underpinning management of the Forest – CON 2/09.

The document under discussion had been pre-circulated. Mr Glyn had compiled a short document to remind the Committee of the statutory duty to manage and conserve heathland. He added that the 1974 Act was now available on the website as a searchable ‘pdf’ document and there was also a summary of all legislation that impinges on the Forest.

5.1/09 Dr Tait said he would like to see a reference added about the European Special Area for Conservation designation and that European legislation was now probably more important than SSSI legislation. He noted that the Forest website was informative and there were many useful links.

5.2/09 Mr Stenhouse stated that greater engagement with NE was required to ensure rules were met and fulfilled. He was concerned that, when HLS money ran out, the Board could be left with responsibilities but no finance. Mr Cooper agreed that Mr Stenhouse had highlighted a conundrum regarding post HLS responsibilities and funding.

6/08 Update on the Close Shepherded Grazing Project.

Ms Amos gave a month by month report of the grazing project to date. This included: the number of sheep owned; days of Forest grazing in the last year; vaccinations; sheep movements; lambing issues; erecting stock fencing; travelling across the UK to collect sheep; recruitment and training of assistants and visits to other grazing schemes. She highlighted extensive preparations for lambing in 2009 and said that the lambing ewes were on an RSPB reserve in Pembury, Kent and would remain there until

spring. Problems included: lack of nearby in-bye land in some locations; lack of an area with hard-standing; lack of an animal shelter and the difficulties of moving bulky and heavy objects such as fencing and feeders. She also listed some tasks for this year including: catching up on record keeping and report writing; maintaining the blog; an impending visit from the Hebridean Sheep Society; beginning Forest grazing; setting up further enclosure sites and lambing. She added that after lambing she expected to have at least 200 sheep grazing from May to October.

6.1/09 Mr Gillham asked how many days of grazing there had been last year, what extent Ms Amos was expecting the sheep to graze and whether it was important that the area to be grazed was mown first. Ms Amos said 56 days were grazed last year and that she was aiming for 100 days in 2009; many factors influenced the hectareage grazed such as the terrain and whether areas had been historically mown rather than as preparation for grazing.

6.2/09 Mr Cooper asked about Blue Tongue vaccination; Ms Amos replied that she would vaccinate again in 2009, attend a local Blue Tongue meeting and follow veterinary advice.

6.3/09 Mr Spicer asked how Ms Amos would graze 100 days when only 56 were achieved last year. She replied that she now had a competent assistant and would graze earlier and finish later.

6.4/09 The Clerk said it was excellent that information was getting out into the scientific and conservation communities but asked about public perception. She replied that there was no hostility but curiosity and occasionally a lack of understanding.

6.5/09 Mr Stenhouse said he remained unhappy with the feasibility study written by Ms Amos last year and that it had been forwarded to NE before the Committee had seen it. He thought the Committee should review the report before it is sent to NE this year.

6.6/09 Mr Spicer commented that something more than an 'impression' was required from Ms Amos' report. Cllr Barnes commented that it would be useful to have before and after evidence. Ms Amos replied that enclosure plots were being set up to show the effect of grazing. Dr Tait pointed out that there was no need to demonstrate if grazing worked as this was well established for heathland and the project was to identify the practical difficulties and how it could be achieved. He went on to say that enclosures were useful but not essential to monitor the effect of grazing.

6.7/09 Mr Spicer said he understood that the project was not about deciding whether grazing worked or not and recognised that mechanical intervention would always be required. He queried Ms Amos' comment that there had been issues about where she could graze due to a lack of in-bye land in some areas. Ms Amos confirmed this and said the solution might be temporary grazing enclosures on the Forest and that this was legally permitted.

6.8/09 Mr Stenhouse asked Ms Amos if it was true that the sheep had their food withheld during the night. He stated that his 'sheep-keeping friends' were horrified at this. Ms Amos replied that when sheep were grazing every day they did not require a night feed and that they normally graze between 7 and 9 hours per day. Efforts were made to concentrate feeding time when they were on heathland. She said their health was carefully and closely monitored, they had an excellent condition score and she invited Mr Stenhouse and his 'sheep-keeping friends' to visit and see for themselves. She also observed that his friends who had sheep feeding at night should be concerned about their animals' welfare.

6.9/09 Mr Glyn reminded the Committee of the terms of reference of the HLS application for the herded grazing project: *"The project Report will give information on how close herded grazing can be implemented. It will describe: set up costs; day-to-day management including the skill requirements of staff, ease of animal movement and containment; effects on vegetation, assessed by monitoring; public response to the*

grazing animals, particularly in respect to problems with dogs; issues of animal husbandry and welfare". Mr Cooper said he had been keeping sheep for 36 years and could confirm that Ms Amos was correct that sheep only graze for 7-9 hours per day and that they do not do so at night. Mr Glyn said sheep were ruminants, incapable of grazing continuously.

7/09 Review of Conservation Objectives and their role in Forest management.

There was a discussion regarding the criteria NE used for 'favourable condition', the meaning of the term and the accompanying legal requirements. Mr Seymour then discussed conservation objectives and commented that NE was considering changing the terminology.

7.1/09 Mr Glyn observed that most of the Forest SSSI was in unfavourable condition. Mr Seymour replied that it was unfavourable but recovering and moving in the right direction due to the amount of work that had been taking place. Cllr Whetstone asked why the figure for favourable condition seemed to have reduced from 5% in January 2006 to 1.5% in December 2008. Mr Seymour replied that the complicated and tightly defined tables were now better tailored to assess condition. Ms Hutchby commented that between the two survey dates there had been a change in methodology and criteria had been sharpened. Mr Seymour went on to say that NE had a continuing obligation after 2010. Dr Tait commented that EU legislation was unlikely to change and there was an obligation on the UK government to ensure heathland sites were maintained. Mr Stenhouse said he had met NE to go through the favourable condition table and he asked that it be made into a more easily understandable document as it was technical. Ms Hutchby questioned how that would be of benefit as it was a reference document but agreed it could be tailored.

7.2/09 Cllr Barnes suggested that the Committee should visit a part of the Forest considered to be in favourable condition and the Chairman asked Mr Marrable to arrange this.

7.3/09 Cllr Barnes suggested that the Committee could sift through the document with NE in 'seminar mode' so that members could see what the problems were. He suggested this should be after any site visit.

7.4/09 The Chairman asked Mr Marrable to make these arrangements and communicate to the Committee, via e-mail, the proposed times and dates. (*Post meeting note: the best time for a site visit would be June rather than the next meeting*).

It was agreed that Mr Marrable would arrange a seminar session for the Committee, with NE, to examine the Conservation Objectives.

It was agreed that Mr Marrable would arrange a site visit to a part of the Forest deemed to be in favourable condition and to one in recovering condition.

It was agreed that a briefer version of the 'favourable condition' criteria would be created for ease of understanding by Board members.

16.30 Mr Cooper left the meeting

8/09 Tree felling on the Forest – when, why and why not – CON 3/09.

The Clerk hoped that the document was self-explanatory. Mr Spicer said it was a very useful document and asked that it be made available, with some amendments, on the website and at each tree felling site. He asked that sight lines and visibility of traffic be taken into account. Cllr Barnes agreed with Mr Spicer about sight lines but recalled the alternative of gorse as a visual barrier.

8.1/09 Mr Gillham reported a request by a member of the public to pass congratulations to the Board on the clearance on the SW of Misbourne Valley. The Clerk reported compliments about the work at Bunker's Hill.

8.2/09 Mr Stenhouse suggested that trees marked as not being felled should be identified to the public.

8.3/09 Mr Stenhouse noted that Scots pine were frequently left and asked why oak trees were being felled. Mr Glyn replied that Scots pine was a normal constituent of heathland while oak, an invasive species, was not. The Clerk stated that pines when cut did not re-grow unlike oaks and leaf litter from oaks altered the nutrients unfavourably below the tree while pines did not.

9/09 Financial Report.

Mr Gillham queried a figure shown under heathland restoration. Mr Marrable stated that the financial reports were not always clear or obvious to him and he would check the figure in question and report back to Mr Gillham. *(Post meeting note: the difference between the original figure (as sent to ESCC in January 2007) and current estimates for Heathland Restoration was explained in the Financial Report for the Board meeting of 28 November 2008. A significant reduction was due to some reallocation of heathland restoration work to be carried out in-house, allowing a proportion of staff salaries to be paid from the HLS budget, thereby freeing up non HLS funds to repair some of the bridges that were damaged in the 2007 floods.*

10/09 Any urgent item for which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman.

Mr Cooper had noted that a new Pooh book would be published in the autumn and stated that there was a potential for increased interest from the public.

The Clerk stated that a Deer Group questionnaire was currently being circulated.

The Chairman directed a previous enquiry about the lack of AOB on agendas from Mr Stenhouse to Cllr Barnes who replied that the Board and Committees were advised to move to the present system in 2007 as the Board was a Statutory Body. This was to allow Chairmen notice to gather background information to provide full answers. He went on to say that if an item was genuinely urgent, the matter should be raised with the Chairman just before the meeting opens.

The meeting closed at 17.00