

Minutes of the

CONSERVATION COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

1430, Monday 3 July 2006

Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Mr P. Glyn (Chairman in the absence of Mr Gillham), Mr F. Brown, Mr M. Cooper, Mr M. Knight (EN), Mr C. Marrable (Conservation Officer), Mr F. Marshall, Ms J. Mortimer (Defra), Mrs R. O'Keeffe (arrived at 1438), Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Mr J. Spicer, Dr A. Tait (ESCC)

Apologies Mr L. Gillham

1) Updates

i) Progress on application for Higher Level Stewardship (HLS)

Ms Mortimer said that the draft document (some copies of which were passed round) setting out the agreement for the Forest's entry into HLS is mostly complete; consultation on protection of the historic environment (one of the five primary objectives of HLS), however, has not yet been done. EN has largely agreed the conservation objectives (see ii) below). Defra would like to sign the agreement by 31 July (realistically, Friday 28 July). Further talks are to take place on 6 July between Forest staff, Defra and ESCC, particularly concerning the position of ESCC. Entry into HLS on 1 August would mean that the first payment would come in February 2007.

Ms Mortimer described briefly the duties of a panel to be set up by Natural England. This would audit the use of HLS funds, assess the progress and success of projects, and agree future objectives and expenditure on HLS-related work. Meeting first on 1 February 2007 and thenceforth at six month intervals, the panel will include specialists in the areas of the five primary objectives of HLS. The Board and the Natural England Project Officer assigned to the Forest would report to the panel who in turn are responsible to Natural England.

Dr Tait said that his understanding was that a panel will give a flexible approach that can accommodate year-on-year changes. If the panel and the Board cannot agree on a work-plan, then future funds simply do not become available. He added that there is a legal arbitration process but that the chances of spending money that does not meet HLS objectives are low. Such schemes, after all, are designed to help the agreement holder (in this case the Board) and problems are only likely to arise in the event of e.g. wilful disaster or fraud.

Although HLS has a 5 year break clause, the expectation is for the agreement to last 10 years. Amendments can be made throughout.

Mr Spicer was concerned that the Board might be rushed into signing something it might later regret. Mr Cooper said he would hate to see the 1 August entry date slip by since the whole project was very exciting and of huge advantage to the Forest and the principle of entry into HLS has never been in doubt. He added that the final document should be sent to the Board as soon as possible along with comments from Mr Marrable and Dr Prendergast.

Mr Marrable said that all parties have to be happy with the agreement. Far from imposing anything on the Board, the panel's role will be to respond to it. Although the objectives will be set by Natural England, they will essentially enable the Board to do more of the sort of work it has already been doing for years (for example under Countryside Stewardship Schemes). The fact that both Mr Knight and Ms Mortimer are on the Committee shows how closely the liaison is with the Board. Mr Glyn added that "everyone is on the same side".

The Committee agreed that the 'ground rules' of the panel's responsibilities and terms of reference need to be clarified and that Ms Mortimer should send the draft agreement to the Board quickly.

ii) Progress on English Nature conservation objectives

Mr Knight said that Conservation Objectives will form part of the Indicators of Success of HLS. Most Objectives have been done but he is still awaiting national guidance on what Favourable Condition means for SSSIs with invertebrates of interest. Generic targets for the characteristics of lowland heathland (e.g. amount of bare ground) have already been incorporated into HLS and will be complete by 1 August. Mapping has started on the Forest's interest features (e.g. habitat areas, species distributions) but targets will need further and detailed discussion with Mr Marrable.

A workshop at the Forest Centre on 12 June, with heathland specialists from all round the South East as well as EN's Heathland Ecologist, Dr Isobel Alonso, looked at a number of areas with respect to the likely impact of grazing and what was likely to be necessary to meet Conservation Objectives. The general conclusion was that humid areas that were already grazed were very good, and unlikely to have got to that state by other means. For similar areas that were ungrazed, however, the general conclusions were that the 'bare minimum' targets of Favourable Condition might possibly be achieved in future with no grazing, but there were serious questions over the long-term sustainability of non-grazing methods. In short, grazing may be required along with some mechanical management, only the latter able, for example, to control dense bracken growth.

Dr Prendergast asked about use of, and aims for, the term 'sustainable'. Ms Mortimer replied that Defra (through its initiative S2F2) is looking at the sustainability of farming, for example through local products. Dr Tait thought that shepherded grazing, if it works, might be a cost-effective option.

iii) Progress on construction of barn at Whitehouse Farm

The appointment of new groundwork contractors seems to have solved most of the problems. The barn is to all intents and purposes complete. The contractor installing the water supply is due to commence work today, with pipes installed by the end of the week. All that remains is for Mr Osborne to sign a Licence to Occupy, based on the agreed Heads of Terms.

The Chairman thanked Mr Marrable. He thought the building "stunning". Mr Marshall, while agreeing that the building was "first class", had looked round the site with Mr Brown and recounted a number of what he thought were problems: unevenness of, and lack of planings on, the track; the excessive height of a grating on the north west side of the barn preventing it catching water coming off the roof; the chalk on the south end is very shallow and should be raised and that on the east side needed hardcore to give a slope; the soil that was removed to lay the concrete is resting on a neighbour's fence; the feeding racks look secure but have a definite give if pressure is applied; the

entrance should have two 15' gates (one of which Mr Osborne will supply); and, finally, the rainwater pipes need guarding where they meet the grilles. Mr Marshall agreed to meet D+D Construction about these items.

2) Early results of species monitoring in 2006

Mr Marrable reported that the three transects are providing many new data, supporting Dr Lee Brady's prediction that the Forest is an extremely (maybe *the* most) important site for reptiles in the South East. Good data have been gathered on lizards and slow worms, with the usual intermittent sightings of adders. He added that management activities that were less "tidy" in some areas may be beneficial to reptiles.

Great crested newts – the survey has been suspended since bottle-trapping is effective only for the early summer. They have been found in the Centre pond and the shallow Ridge Road pond.

Silver-studded blues – the first of the year have been found. It looks as though it might be a good year.

Dartford warblers - numbers are really low, probably due to the snowfall in April. Woodlarks and Redstart numbers look good.

3) Stakeholder analysis – 3KQ

Mr Marrable said that the Forest is leading nationally in the application of stakeholder analysis for developing management options. He said that he had had a meeting with EN (who are taking a keen interest in this work as it has national implications) and a further meeting is due in late July with 3KQ to discuss how to address the issues raised in the scoping study. He recommended that Board talks to Richard Harris about stakeholder engagement. Michael Knight agreed with this and said that from an EN/Natural England perspective stakeholder engagement is an essential part of managing heathland in HLS.

Dr Tait said ESCC commissioned a MORI poll a few years ago of the East Sussex population in which it was found that nearly 50% had visited the Forest, more than any other county destination other than the Seven Sisters. A recent survey of residents in the Pebsham area (where a country park is being developed) found that the loss of species and habitats was seen as a more important issue than dog fouling and that watching wildlife was the most desired recreational need.

Mr Glyn said he was prepared to back the idea of a further 3KQ meeting to the full and emphasised that its report must be discussed at regular intervals by the Board and not sit on the shelf. He was delighted that stakeholder engagement is written into HLS. Mr Knight thought a workshop involving 3KQ a good idea and that it should be funded out of HLS. Mr Spicer thought it should be funded by the Board. Mr Marrable said it is not yet known how much professional help will be needed from 3KQ and how much it might cost.

4) AOB

Mr Glyn congratulated Dr Prendergast on the editing and publication of *Heathlands – past, present and future* (the Proceedings of the 8th National Heathland Conference in 2004) and recommended the reading of it to the Committee.

The meeting finished at 1630.