

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

1430, Monday 29 June 2009

Forest Centre car park then Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present: Mr P Glyn (Chairman), Cllr J Barnes (*ex-officio*), Dr K Cole (ESCC), Mr M Cooper, Mr L Gillham, Mr J Harding (Forestry Commission), Cllr M Hoy, Miss L Hutchby (NE), Mr C Marrable (Conservation Officer), Dr H Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr R St Pierre, Mr J Spicer, Mr E Stenhouse and Mr R Thornely-Taylor (*ex-officio*).

Also present: Miss L Amos.

**Election of Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Conservation Committee as required by Standing Orders 1.2**

Cllr Barnes took the chair to facilitate the election of a Chairman and Vice Chairman and asked the Committee for nominations.

Mr Gillham proposed Mr Glyn and this was seconded by Cllr Hoy. There were no other nominations. Mr Glyn was duly elected and took up the Chairmanship with thanks.

The Committee went on to elect Vice Chairman. Mr Glyn proposed Cllr St Pierre and this was seconded by Mr Cooper. Cllr St Pierre was duly elected and took up the Vice-Chairmanship with thanks.

The Chairman then opened the meeting and welcomed Dr Kate Cole to the committee as successor to Dr Alex Tait. Dr Cole said she had been at ESCC for eight years, worked with NE and had a policy background. She was primarily a marine biologist but looked forward to learning more about the Forest and terrestrial issues.

The Chairman welcomed the member of the public present and invited questions for 10 minutes from the floor. There were no questions.

**20/09 Site visit to Broadstone Heath for an explanation of Conservation Objectives.**

The Committee met at the Forest Centre car park and followed Mr Marrable onto Broadstone Heath for an explanation of NE's Conservation Objectives by Miss Hutchby.

**21/09 Apologies.**

There were no apologies.

**22/09 Declarations of Interest.**

There was none.

**22/09 Close Shepherded Grazing Feasibility Project – Year 2 report – CON 8**

The document under discussion had been pre-circulated and the Chairman asked Miss Amos to answer any questions from the Committee.

Mr Stenhouse stated that the report was insufficient to answer questions and that he had prepared a document to be tabled. Cllr St Pierre said she was reluctant to have a document tabled, no matter how valid it may be, and this was echoed by other members of the Committee. Mr Spicer stated that, like Mr Stenhouse, he had expressed doubts about the project and how it was being managed by the Board. Mr Gillham expressed concern that Mr Stenhouse repeatedly raised the same questions. Cllr Barnes said that Mr Stenhouse was in danger of confusing feasibility with cost effectiveness.

The Chairman asked Mr Stenhouse to direct any questions he may have to Miss Amos. He replied he had 16 questions. He asked why grazing was only 55 days. Miss Amos replied that question was answered in the report and asked Mr Stenhouse if he thought it acceptable for the shepherd to work seven days per week without a break.

Mr Stenhouse asked how many hectares were grazed per year. Miss Amos replied that about 30 hectares had been grazed.

Mr Stenhouse asked if the sheep grazed specific sites once or more than once, per year and the effect. Miss Amos replied that monitoring was required and this had not yet been done.

Mr Stenhouse asked if Miss Amos was limited in the time she could take the sheep out by the weather. She replied that the weather had no effect.

Mr Stenhouse said that the costs for feed and vets were three times higher than he expected. He said the costs should be £7.00 per sheep. Cllr St Pierre asked where Mr Stenhouse had got that figure from and he replied 'Nix'.

Mr Stenhouse enquired of the maximum number of sheep that could be shepherded. Miss Amos replied that it worked well with 225 sheep and the maximum had not yet been reached.

Miss Amos said that she thought Mr Stenhouse was missing the point of the project. It was an exploratory rather than a financial feasibility report and she was, in her opinion, delivering the remit.

Mr Stenhouse stated that he totally disagreed with the way 'this is being done' and asked that this be recorded.

Cllr St Pierre said that, as a sheep keeper herself, she was aware that rare breeds were not easily managed and congratulated Miss Amos on her professionalism and on the report. She went on to ask how Miss Amos felt the project was going in relation to engaging the public. Miss Amos replied that she had used many opportunities to hear public views on grazing and that the project was popular and seen as beneficial. She went on to say to Mr Stenhouse that grazing was the best form of management and recommended by NE. The project was to look at how the Board could deliver grazing in such a way as to be satisfactory to other Forest users.

Mr Gillham and the Chairman also thanked Miss Amos for an excellent report.

Miss Hutchby said she had noted in the report that there had been some problems with dog walkers and asked Miss Amos how she had dealt with them. Miss Amos replied that she had had many opportunities to talk to dog walkers and that it was easy to keep dogs away from the sheep. She added that dog walkers were often initially 'ticked off' by having to put their dogs on leads but after she had talked over the project with them they usually went away without any ill-feeling.

Cllr Barnes said that in-bye fields seemed to have been a problem and asked if something was being done to improve the situation. Miss Amos replied that steps were being taken, where necessary, to improve some of the current in-bye land. She added that some landowners had reported that grazing had provided a beneficial effect on the state of their fields. The Clerk said that what was very impressive was the number, range of size and geographical spread of in-bye land across the Forest. There were also large numbers of local people and local land managers supporting the project.

Cllr Barnes stated that the other point the Committee needed to appreciate was the difficulty in retaining an assistant shepherd. Miss Amos said it was very hard to retain agricultural workers if there was no accommodation provided with the post; many places that had such accommodation found it much easier to recruit and retain staff. Mr Gillham said that the restrictions to the project seemed clear; lack of in-bye land and staffing, with the latter giving a greater cause for concern.

Cllr St Pierre asked about the marketing of heathland Hebridean products such as meat and Miss Amos explained that this year there was a possibility of some of the ram lambs going to the Melton Market rare breeds sale and some of the wethers going to slaughter; any income would come back to the Board.

Mr Cooper asked why Hebridean sheep had been selected. Miss Amos replied there were many reasons such as being the best grazers, however, was possible to produce a more commercial lamb if a different tupp was used and this would be explored next year.

### **23/09 The future of grazing - a sequel to the Close Shepherded Grazing Feasibility Project (2007-2010) – CON 9**

The document, a proposal to extend grazing by the Conservators beyond 2010, had been pre-circulated.

Cllr Hoy asked on why there was so little grazing currently by Commoners on the Forest. Mr Thornely-Taylor explained there was a risk of animals being involved in road traffic accidents resulting in loss of income for the farmer, that the paperwork required by DEFRA for the movement of animals was onerous as there were issues around different farmers using the same field numbers for stock.

Mr Cooper addressed a question directly to Miss Hutchby. He asked if the first paragraph of her letter was saying that the Board effectively had no choice on the matter of conservation grazing and that mechanical grazing was merely a 'stop-gap'. Miss Hutchby replied 'yes'. Mr Thornely-Taylor asked if, once the Forest was in favourable condition, grazing would have to be maintained and the Chairman replied 'yes' unless a new equally effective technique was discovered.

There was a discussion on the benefits of grazing. The Chairman observed that it was universally recognised that grazing produced the best biodiversity and most National Nature Reserves were now grazed. Cllr Barnes commented that section 7 of the year 2 report showed that the trial area that had been mown had proved as 'unsuccessful' as in the unmanaged control area. Mr Gillham commented that the 1989 Sussex University monitoring showed there was a huge increase in *Molinia caerulea* (purple moor-grass) on mown sites unlike areas that had been properly grazed. Mr Spicer said he would like to know the maximum feasible number of animals that could be grazed, the staff to animal ratio and the costs of any fencing. He went on to say he was not being negative but thought more work needed to be done before a decision could be finally made and the Board be fully in agreement.

The Chairman said this type of grazing was not cheap; it was not something you would do if profits were important. It was a tool that enabled the Board to manage a legacy.

There was a discussion on the pros and cons of fencing and it was agreed that a mixture of both grazing and fencing would probably be the way forward. Mr Gillham said he had noted a palpable change in public perception of fencing and Cllr St Pierre agreed saying that the car parks within the grazing area were as well used as those without. Mr Gillham said that the public could see improvements in the landscape where restoration had taken place.

Mr Cooper asked for some documented evidence of public reaction and it was agreed that this would be included. Mr Marrable replied that the sheep were the best PR the Board had had for many years with the sheep days and sheep walks proving extremely popular with large numbers of people.

There was a short discussion on the recommendations laid out in (5). There was general agreement that an idea of costs and any contributions from NE would be required and that it was vital to take into account NE's advisory target of favourable condition.

There was a discussion on the merits of burning with Mr Stenhouse asking if it was a 'no-no'. Mr Marrable said that burning had its merits. It was a relatively modern management tool used by Forest Commoners. A good effect could be obtained in areas that had been grazed but far less so in ungrazed areas because bracken quickly dominated. Mr Thornely-Taylor said that burning was a good way to manage heather but not for reclaiming lost heath.

There was a discussion on the benefits of grazing versus mechanical cutting on inaccessible and archaeological sites and it was agreed that grazing was far less damaging to archaeology and was

accepted best practice. Cllr Barnes wondered if funding for the grazing project might then be available from English Heritage.

Cllr Barnes said that he favoured a new grazing project and that it was essential to retain the animals, the expertise and the funding. He agreed that it was wise to ask questions about the maximum number of sheep that could be grazed and the staff: sheep: fence ratio. It was important to go further, increase the size of the flock, look at the other possible breeds of sheep to improve marketability, look at ways to increase the number of days grazed, improve the location of in-bye land (where possible) and take into account general and strategic fencing needs and the attitudes and perceptions of the public. It was important for the Board to address the limiting factor of housing for agricultural workers. He looked forward to the third report that would take all the above into consideration.

The Chairman asked for a vote on the recommendations set out in the paper and there was a majority show of hands in support.

**The Conservation Committee accepted the recommendations laid down in the document 'The future of grazing - a sequel to the Close Shepherded Grazing Feasibility Project (2007-2010)' – CON 9**

#### **24/09 Deer on Ashdown Forest – CON 10**

The document, a proposal for the Board to consider culling on the Forest, had been pre-circulated.

Mr Cooper said he supported an exploration of the initiative but thought there were many practical and legislative problems to overcome.

*16.30 Mr Cooper left the meeting.*

The Clerk gave the Committee details of recent progress made by the Ashdown Area Deer Group (AADG). The AADG now had a good idea of the levels of culling undertaken by landowners. He added that it was disappointing that so few Conservators had become involved in the local Deer Management Group (DMG) that was being set up and urged the Committee to support the present efforts being made by the AADG and the DMG. The Board should return to the subject in three to four years time when the effects of the work carried out by the DMG could be seen.

Mr Stenhouse said that experienced stalkers could operate in areas where the public go such as Richmond Park and the New Forest.

The Chairman asked the Committee if Mr Fred Marshall, a member of the public, well known local deer stalker and national deer expert, could give his input to the discussion.

Mr Marshall said he was a stalker with over 50 years experience, he knew the Forest intimately and the deer very well indeed. He said the main problem was the number of landowners within the Pale harbouring considerable numbers of Fallow deer on their land. Pippingford, for example, had a population of 250 and other areas held similar numbers. Many local landowners harbouring deer did not want culling and unless that could be overcome no real progress could be made. He said it was only feasible if the Government brings in legislation on deer numbers. He went on to say that stalkers could cull; however, the health and safety concerns were far more important. The Forest was a unique area, there were an estimated 1.5 million visitors with people being out on the Forest every day and night of the year making it an unsafe place to shoot. On many estates, such as National Trust land, people were not present at night and sites could be closed to allow safe shooting. The terrain of the Forest and the gorse thickets and bracken also added to the dangers. He went on to say that rifles were dangerous weapons and the damage they can do should never be underestimated.

There was no such thing as a 'safe shot' with a rifle, ricochets on clay soil were common, shots could pass right through a deer and come out anywhere at an unpredictable angle – any public liability insurance would be prohibitively high.

There was a discussion on night time shooting and it was noted that it was efficient but illegal without dispensation and there was likely to be opposition from the public and the Police.

Mr Stenhouse said that he wanted to know how culling could be done, during early morning and at dusk, for the benefit of the Conservators. The Clerk replied that Mr Cordery, SE Deer Liaison Officer of the Deer Initiative, had given an excellent presentation on deer management on April 29<sup>th</sup> and invitations had been sent to Conservators. Local deer management groups were being established across the UK and four to five years were needed to have an effect. Mr Cordery was willing to visit again to talk to the Board. Mr Stenhouse replied he was not talking about deer management, he wanted to know how a cull could be done. Mr Marshall said that unless the Forest could be closed there was no way of ensuring safe shooting and if anything should go wrong it would be the Board who would shoulder full responsibility.

The Clerk said that two night-time surveys had shown that there were no deer on the heaths, rather, deer were crossing the Forest going to and from feeding areas. Attempts at culling on the Forest were, therefore, not likely to be fruitful. He asked again for the Committee to wait for the DMG initiative with landowners to take effect and agreed with Mr Marshall that shooting was too dangerous. Mr Spicer agreed with the Clerk regarding guns and shooting on the Forest and asked that the Board's position on culling be explained on the website.

Mr Gillham said there was a perception that culling was too dangerous and he would welcome a presentation from Mr Cordery.

Mr Thornely-Taylor asked how the Board would explain to the public that one grazing animal was being introduced and another culled. He asked if deer were of no use to heathland. Mr Harding replied that deer browsing caused damage to trees.

Cllr Barnes said he had listened to Mr Marshall with enormous respect. There was, in his opinion, a conservation case for culling and it would, in the long-term, improve the health and quality of the remaining deer and any cull would have to be better than the indiscriminate killing taking place on the roads. He went on to say it was important that the Board was not anti-cull and that it was in favour of culling for conservation reasons. The issue of culling should be looked at to see if it was feasible if only in the fenced area on a specific day per year.

**It was agreed that Cllr Barnes and the Clerk, with the assistance of Mr Marshall, would draft a statement on the Board's position on culling deer to be placed on the website.**

*16.45 Cllr St Pierre left the meeting*

## **25/09 Financial information for Conservation Committee responsibilities – CON 11**

The document under discussion had been pre-circulated. Mr Marrable reported that a mulcher was now on order.

## **26/09 Matters arising**

Comment on reporting of Minute 18/09 of the Committee meeting of 30 March 2009 and further discussed at the Board meeting of 8 June 2009 as such:

13.2/09 Mr Stenhouse said that the minutes were incomplete since he claimed that at the Conservation meeting he had voiced his concern about the number of trees, with a potential for timber use, being felled. He went on to say he had proposed that timber trees should be kept and he had since met Mr Marrable, the Conservation Officer, who had agreed to visit future cutting areas with him. Mr Gillham stated he had no problem with Mr Stenhouse's proposal as long as it did not detract in any way from the conservation of heathland. *Post-meeting note* – The minute taker's notes have no record of Mr Stenhouse's observations. 13.3/09 The Chairman said that if there was found to be an inaccuracy then the original minutes would need to be scrutinised, amended to the Committee's satisfaction and be discussed at the next meeting as a matter arising.

Mr Stenhouse stated that he thought he had been supported by Cllr Barnes on timber trees. Cllr Barnes said that there was nothing recorded in the contemporaneous notes of the meeting. He went on to say that specimen trees were retained in the right setting but that it was important they did not get in the way of heathland restoration and management. Mr Marrable said that, from an environmental and conservation point of view, heathland under older deciduous trees did deteriorate and there was more likely to be public resistance to felling trees when they were older and larger; however, he was happy to allow some pines to get a bit older.

**27/09 Any urgent item for which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman.**  
There was none.

*The meeting closed at 17.15.*