

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

1430, Monday 30 March 2009
Forest Centre car park then Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

Present: Mr P Glyn (Chairman), Cllr J Barnes (*ex-officio*), Mr M Cooper, Mr L Gillham (*ex-officio*), Cllr M Hoy, Mr C Johnson (ESCC Archaeologist), Miss L Hutchby (NE), Mr C Marrable (Conservation Officer), Dr H Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr R St Pierre, Mr E Stenhouse, Dr A Tait (ESCC Ecologist).

Also present: Cllr F Whetstone.

There was one member of the public present.

11/09 Site visit to look at aspects of heathland management – scrub regeneration, post-fire recovery, wet heath management, impact of heather beetle

The Committee met at the Forest Centre car park and followed Mr Marrable onto Broadstone heath. *En route* he pointed out a 200 year old beech tree which, overhanging a path, posed a certain level of risk. He said it was difficult to balance health and safety aspects of such trees against their obvious wildlife value. He referred to the method of assessment of a large beech at Wych Cross crossroads that had recently been felled because of its proximity to the A22.

Mr Marrable pointed out an area of old and even aged heather that would benefit from management through cutting. He explained the extent of heath that was burned in 2000, its good recovery from that and from outbreaks of heather last summer, the worst for many years. Heather affected by beetle infestation is conspicuously brown.

12/09 Apologies.

Apologies were received from Mr J Harding (Forestry Commission) and Mr J Spicer.

The Chairman informed the Committee that Dr Tait was retiring and that this would be his last meeting attendance. He commented on Dr Tait's rare and focussed depth of knowledge and thanked him, on behalf of the Board, for his invaluable contribution over many years.

13/09 Declarations of Interest.

There was none.

14/09 Financial Update – CON 4.

The document under discussion had been tabled.

14.1/9 Mr Marrable reported that a grinder had not been purchased but one had now been sourced and he was waiting to be advised on the actual cost. He went on to say that it was slightly wider than the current Rousseau and the terrain would dictate the speed of its operation.

14.2/9 There was a short discussion regarding depreciation and Cllr Barnes commented that it was the Board's policy not to depreciate. Mr Marrable confirmed that the item would remain in the possession of the Board at the end of HLS.

14.3/9 Cllr St Pierre asked for clarification on the figure given for litter picking. The Clerk explained that the 'spike' in 2008/2009 costings was due to a series of asbestos dumping incidents. Cllr Barnes reminded members that litter clearance was not the remit of this Committee.

15/09 Main heathland restoration work areas for 2009/2010 - CON 5.

The document under discussion had been pre-circulated.

- 15.1/9 Mr Stenhouse asked to see the whole plan up to the end of HLS. The Chairman replied that the plan for the full ten year period was available on the website. Mr Marrable said it was revised and checked annually. He went on to say there was occasional slippage due to weather conditions and high priority work. In year 5, the whole schedule would be reviewed and re-prioritised. Some areas may be visited twice and others not at all; other areas may drop off the plan if judged unrecoverable.
- 15.2/9 Mr Stenhouse asked what the situation was on notifying the public regarding tree felling. Mr Marrable replied that trees being felled were marked to assist contractors and those being left were marked in a different way.
- 15.3/9 There was a short discussion regarding wood sales and estovers. Mr Marrable commented that wood sales brought in a small income and helped with the manual work. However, much of the wood extracted was too small for domestic use and located in inaccessible areas; for mowing purposes, stumps needed to be low and people with wood permits were not always willing to comply. The Clerk agreed that wood permits and estovers tended to be collected from woodland areas due to the height of stump cutting and that roughly half the wood permits issued were to commoners.
- 15.4/9 Mr Stenhouse asked about liability of those using chainsaws. Cllr St Pierre commented that if the public were using a chainsaw without a certificate of competence they held all liability. Mr Marrable commented that the use of chainsaws was 'domestic' and that there was no obligation to train them. He added that everyone taking wood from the Forest was required to show adequate insurance.

16/08 Update on 2008/9 winter work and other issues - CON 6

- 16.1/9 Mr Marrable reported that he had been looking at a replacement for the Rousseau grinder and had recently made a visit to Windsor Great Park for a demonstration by an East Sussex distributor of a straight replacement.
- 16.2/9 Mr Marrable reported that there had been a small Forest fire (0.6ha) last week near Misbourne in an area of woody scrub. There had also been two other unsuccessful attempts at arson that had caused very little damage. He went on to say that as the season progresses, fires become increasingly damaging. Dr Tait commented that there was a decline in accidental fires due to the fact that there were fewer smokers. Mr Marrable stated that, if fires became a problem, he would recommend a review of the current rules surrounding BBQs as the public seem to go out of car parks and into the undergrowth where the fire danger is greater.
- 16.3/9 Mr Marrable reported that the controlled burn in conjunction with ESFRS had not been successful due to bad weather. He went on to say that the current method of carrying out a joint exercise would be changed to improve the likelihood of success.

17/09 Natural England's Conservation Objectives – CON 7

The document under discussion had been pre-circulated. The Chairman thanked Mr Marrable for his précis of the detailed NE technical document and for creating a digestible and accurate description of 'favourable condition'. Mr Marrable thanked Louise Hutchby for her assistance. He stated that he had tried to retain the spirit of the original document and was happy to answer any questions.

- 17.1/9 Mr Cooper asked who judged condition as it was judgemental by definition and questioned the accuracy of such judgements. He also asked about the role of eradication and where it was defined in the document. Mr Marrable replied that he and Louise Hutchby personally judged condition. The Chairman noted that negative indicators and alien species were covered in page four of the document. She went on to say that the method of assessing

favourable condition was well recognised and involved a quick overview of a site. It did not scrutinise at the detailed level of a quadrat. Mr Marrable said that he had a different view but he tried to respond to NE targets if achievable.

17.2/9 Dr Tait stated that targets were only a real issue when dealing with borderline favourable or unfavourable condition. In some cases, precision was required; others would be clearly 'broad brush'. He went on to say that there were not many areas on the Forest where elements of doubt were spread over large compartments.

17.3/9 Cllr St Pierre asked if the impact of humans was taken into account in the document. Miss Hutchby replied that humans were not brought into the equation unless they were causing the Forest not to meet its targets. In those situations it would be flagged up and taken into account. The Clerk said that disturbance by people was included in the reference to trampling and erosion on paths.

17.4/9 Cllr Barnes asked for a definition of the term 'bird assemblage'. Miss Hutchby replied that it referred to breeding heathland birds at the time the site was notified; each species was scored (from 1 to 3) on the basis of rarity. Dr Tait commented that at the time of designation the 'score' was 61 and although the content of the assemblage may change the score should not drop below the initial assessment. Mr Marrable replied that it was currently 65.

17.4/9 The Chairman said that the document would form the basis of a discussion at the proposed field visit in June and extended an invitation to all Committee members to attend. Cllr Barnes suggested that the document be shared with the Parish Liaison Committee and placed on the website.

18/09 A Committee member has requested consideration of the following as urgent items:

The second annual report of the shepherded grazing project

Mr Stenhouse said that the Committee should assess the next report before it was passed to the client. He went on to say it should contain data on the hours grazed, why grazing had not taken place on various days and should not laud itself as a great success as it was not.

18.1/9 Cllr Barnes said that quantification would be helpful. He went on to say that grazing was costly but that it did have advantages over mechanisation.

18.2/9 The Chairman stated that the client was the Board not NE. The Board had applied for funding and succeeded in obtaining money for the project. He went on to say that Miss Amos was well aware of what was required in the report.

18.3/9 Mr Stenhouse stated that he thought NE was the client. The Chairman stated that the report was provided for the benefit of the Board. He added that many organisations were looking at the project with great interest. Cllr Whetstone said that once the Board published the report, anyone could use it. Mr Marrable said the report would be available after May 2009.

The application of NE's climate change policy on the Forest

Mr Stenhouse asked what the NE policy was on tree felling and climate change. He said that it seemed wrong that the Board should be felling so many trees.

18.4/9 Miss Hutchby handed Mr Stenhouse an NE document about NE's policy. This document was readily available on the NE website. She went on to say that research by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology has shown that heathland stores far more carbon than woodland and that wet heathland stores even more. She explained that this was because its carbon is stored in soil, unlike woodland whose soils quickly recycle carbon and are constantly active. She said trees are carbon neutral as carbon is only stored for a short period, not the

geological timescale of rocks. NE had a remit of conserving biodiversity and advising on the conservation of species in the face of climate change.

18.5/9 The Chairman contrasted tree clearance on wet heath with felling of conifers in upland areas and wondered if that could be what Mr Stenhouse was referring to. He went on to say that drying out of wet heathland by trees released methane, a far more harmful gas. Mr Stenhouse replied he had no interest in upland deforestation but he was against felling any trees. Mr Gillham asked Mr Stenhouse how, if the Board were unable to fell trees, they were expected to manage heathland conservation. Mr Stenhouse replied he agreed with heathland restoration.

18.6/9 Mr Gillham said that the Forest had a greater percentage of woodland than the rest of the High Weald and nationally.

18.7/9 In referring to Mr Stenhouse, Cllr Whetstone commented that it was very odd for someone whose business was using timber to be opposed to felling trees.

The impact of heathland restoration on the flooding of roads and properties on the Forest

Mr Stenhouse said that rainfall was heavier than previously and that it was a concern that water coming from cleared areas of the Forest was flooding over roads. He went on to say that the formulae used to calculate run-off rate would be different and should be taken into account. He said that the road at Duddleswell was flooding due to tree felling.

18.8/9 There was a short discussion regarding collection of rainfall data and Cllr St Pierre described a research study taking place called REAP and asked if anyone was interested in collecting data to get further details from her.

18.9/9 The Chairman commented that analysis over 35 years on the River Severn Estuary catchment showed that tree felling had no effect on flooding. The Board had consulted the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency and have been advised that an impact assessment was not required due to the small scale of the felling operations. Mr Gillham commented that scale of felling operations was very modest, and he would be amazed if this was causing flooding. The Clerk stated that he had not heard of any flooding at Duddleswell. Cllr Whetstone commented that there was actually less flooding locally this year than previously.

18.10/9 The Chairman stated that Mr Spicer had contacted him about increased flooding in the Sandy Lane area possibly connected with tree felling. The Chairman raised the responsibility of a landowner to drain their property adequately.

18.11/9 Mr Cooper commented that his 20 year rainfall records in High Hurstwood suggested annual rainfall was capricious, varying from 24 to 48 inches, with the average being about 30 inches.

18.12/9 Cllr Barnes suggested that the Board should cooperate with the rainfall data survey, described earlier by Cllr St Pierre, and pass any run-off issues to the RPA Committee. He went on to say that he would take some persuading that the Board's work had any effect on flooding and added that the number of houses in Crowborough had more effect on the Rother. The Clerk said that extensive developments such as tennis courts could also locally alter run-off. Cllr Barnes and the Chairman both stated that the Board and the Committee would keep in touch with the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission.

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

There was none.

The meeting closed at 16.30.