

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

1430, Monday 24 September 2007

Present Mr P Glyn (Chairman), Mr M Cooper, Mr L Gillham, Mr J Harding (Forestry Commission), Cllr M Hoy, Miss L Hutchby (Natural England [NE]), Mr C Marrable (Conservation Officer), Dr H Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr R St Pierre, Mr J Seymour (NE), Mr E Stenhouse and Dr A Tait (ESCC Ecologist).

Also present: Cllr F Whetstone.

1. **Apologies:** Miss J Mortimer (NE) and Mr J Spicer.

2. **Declarations of Interest** There was none.

3a) **Conservation Objectives and b) Condition Assessments for heathland**

An overview of a) and results of b) by Miss Hutchby.

a) Conservation Objectives As stated in the draft Plan:

SSSIs are notified because of specific biological or geological features. Conservation Objectives define the desired state for each site in terms of the features for which they have been designated. When these features are being managed in a way which maintains their nature conservation value, then they are said to be in 'favourable condition'.

For Ashdown Forest, conservation objectives have been written for European dry heath, North Atlantic wet heath, wet woodland, nightjar, Dartford warbler, dormouse, great crested newt, silver-studded blue butterfly, purple emperor butterfly, insect assemblages. Attributes are described for each of these features and targets are set, concerned mainly with habitat extent and population size.

Favourable Condition

The Conservation Objectives are accompanied by one or more habitat extent and quality definitions for the special interest features at this site. These are subject to periodic reassessment and may be updated to reflect new information or knowledge; they will be used by NE and other relevant authorities to determine if a site is in Favourable Condition. The standards for Favourable Condition have been developed for application throughout the UK.

b) Condition Assessment The Forest's heathland had been divided up into 55 units for ease of management. Following the identification of negative attributes, an overall assessment was carried out during the summer of 2007. The results showed that with regard to heathland, only one site was in "unfavourable but recovering" condition, the other 54 were in an "unfavourable" condition. For invertebrates, 21 sites were in a "favourable" condition and 29 were in an "unfavourable" condition. The poor summer was not thought to be a contributing factor. A table was produced to explain the reasons for failure. This showed the weaknesses and where effort needed to be concentrated. (See Appendix)

Mr Stenhouse expressed concern over the cost of the exercise and asked if NE were carrying out similar assessments in other parts of the country. It was explained that there was a national template for monitoring sites and the same approach was taken countrywide. Funding schemes had been made available to help achieve the objectives,

the HLS funds for Ashdown Forest being an example. Mr Glyn emphasised that the Board managed the Forest and that it was NE's role to help and advise the owners/managers of SSSIs. In reply to Dr Prendergast's query as to how local variations in heathland were accommodated, Mr Seymour explained that the Conservation Objectives helped to define how a site was assessed; NE then worked with managers of sites how to reach the end goal. Miss Hutchby stated that she had worked with the Forest staff during the summer and had found no need to change the targets. Cllr Whetstone asked what were the consequences if targets were not met. It was explained that if a site was found to be "unfavourable", this was a warning that work needed to be done to move towards becoming "favourable". The Higher Level Scheme is NE's means by which it can fulfil its Public Service Agreement of getting 95% of SSSIs into "favourable condition" or "unfavourable recovering" by 2010.

Mr Cooper asked what monitoring was being carried out. It was explained that the HLS Panel ensured that the money was being spent effectively. Cllr St. Pierre expressed her surprise at the unfavourable condition of the heathland but Miss Hutchby said that NE were aware of the state and Mr Tait explained that all the heathland sites in East Sussex were in an unfavourable state due to the lack of grazing. Miss Hutchby stated that she would be working with Forest staff to determine the work to be done. A degree of flexibility was built into the system to allow for local variances. Mr Tait stated that the national targets set must not overlook the local importance for a particular wildlife site. Mr Stenhouse queried Natural England's approach and Mr Seymour agreed to discuss the matter with him at a later date.

4. Forest Plan – the Conservation Committee contribution

Review draft.

Major Stenhouse stated that the document was not a Plan. No one agreed. Mr Glyn explained that it was a draft with the aim to produce a working document. He then proceeded to consider the document page by page. Mr Stenhouse stated that Chelwood Vachery was not part of the SSSI. He was told that it was.

Mr Tait stated that a distinction should be made between national objectives and objectives specific to Ashdown Forest, for example, improve habitat for other animals and birds that are valued for human enjoyment such as the skylark and curlew. A number of suggestions were put forward to encourage public participation including an invitation to suggest favourite birds and the use of "consult" rather than "inform". In addition, it was felt that by emphasising "sustainable" management, the public would feel encouraged to participate in discussions.

It was recognised that the current size of the Hebridean flock would make a limited impact on the improvement of the heathland. However, Mr Marrable said that much was being learnt from the grazing project and, as Mr Seymour pointed out, the project was examining the feasibility of close-shepherding rather than grazing which was already acknowledged as the ideal management technique for heathland.

There was a general discussion about terminology, layout and the possibility of having two parts to the Plan; the first to state the overall strategic objectives and the second to outline short-term objectives. Dr Prendergast said that any plan requires continual updating and short-term objectives can be accommodated in the annual Action Plan.

It was agreed that Dr Prendergast would summarise parts of NE's presentation for inclusion in the Plan.

5. HLS Update

GIS vegetation mapping project This had been done using aerial photography and had been completed. Mr Marrable presented the results which showed that, despite all the work done clearing scrub over the last five years, there had been little change in the overall woodland cover.

Archaeological fieldwork The survey had identified many sites, increasing the now established sites from 70 to 450.

Proposed winter work 2007/2008 A schedule of work was presented by Mr Marrable. He stated that the necessary felling licences had been obtained.

It was agreed that the schedule would be put on the web site with a detailed explanation of the work to be done. In addition, Parish Councils and local residents would be informed.

Close shepherding project The foot and mouth outbreak had prevented the sheep being moved to the Forest. However, the shepherd had taken the opportunity to proceed with fencing more in-bye land and researching educational opportunities.

6. Update on meetings with the Forestry Commission and woodland management

Mr Harding briefed the Committee on the size of trees that could be felled without a felling licence. A discussion followed on the implication for Commoners to exercise their right to estovers.

The Committee recommended that the Board agree that Commoners should be allowed to fell trees in accordance with the Forestry Commission rules, i.e. any tree smaller than 8cm diameter at breast height. In addition, felled timber from the winter scrub clearing contracts would be placed near car parks for collection by Commoners and members of the public who applied for a wood licence. Both the Commoners and members of the public would still be required to have personal liability insurance to use a chainsaw on public access land and the cutting season would remain from 1 November to 31 March.

7. AOB

There had been a complaint from a resident in Sandy Lane about flooding following the extreme rain storm in July. The Clerk had discussed the matter with the Chase Ranger and was confident that the flooding was a result of the exceptional nature of the storm rather than as a result of any work done on the Forest.

The Chairman apologised to the members of the public present for not welcoming them in the first instance and offered them the opportunity to ask questions.

Mr White asked if wild boar were present on the Forest. Dr Prendergast replied that he had received reports of a wild boar being seen very near the Forest Centre and one had been killed on the A26 near Herons Ghyll.

The meeting closed at 16.50