

Position Statement: Conservation grazing of the Pebblebed heaths

Plans to manage East Devon's Pebblebed Heaths sustainably have been evolving for the last two decades. The aims of management undertaken by the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust, the charity established by Clinton Devon Estates to manage the heaths of Dalditch, East Budleigh, Bicton, Woodbury, Colaton Raleigh and Hawkerland Commons, are: 1) to fulfil the legal national and European obligations of Clinton Devon Estate to ensure this threatened ecosystem is protected and returned to a favourable conservation status, 2) to ensure all wildlife associated with the heathland flourishes, 3) to protect public access and encourage responsible public enjoyment of the heaths, 4) to safeguard landscape aesthetics, and 4) to promote environmental stewardship and public understanding of this ecosystem.

The most recent endeavour to achieve 'best management practice' on the heaths started in 2009 and followed the principles set out in '*A Common Purpose: A guide to agreeing management of common land*'. *A Common Purpose* outlines a 'best practice' approach of working with common land stakeholders to promote the development of management proposals. In the case of the Pebblebed Heaths the process began with the production of an 'Options Appraisal' of potential management practices. A full consultation of the options was then undertaken with local residents, formal community organisations, parish, district and county councils, local conservation, amenity and recreational bodies (including the Open Spaces Society), the MOD, emergency services and local MPs. The consultation phase involved the use of a range of media and methods including the web, letters, leaflets, posters, press releases, articles, public meetings, open days and 'drop-in' events. The responses from all consultees were analysed, with strong general support for the grazing recommended by the management options appraisal, although some concerns were expressed about the landscape impact of the erection of permanent fencing in specific areas. A number of recommendations arose from this consultation, including that a feasibility study should be undertaken of permanently enclosing and grazing the main Commons area. The recommendation to further investigate this possibility was accepted by the Trustees of the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust.

Benefits of grazing

Conservation grazing replicates the practices of the commoners of old and has been proven to be an extremely useful heathland management practice. To summarise:

Benefits of grazing include:

- Inhibition of tree seedling growth and recruitment
- Reduction of cover of purple moor grass and other grasses
- Maintenance of structural diversity of vegetation
- Promotion of a greater diversity of herb species
- Expansion of areas of bare ground which can have a positive impact on invertebrate habitats
- Exposure of desirable heathland species seed banks to sunlight through trampling
- Mitigation against atmospheric nitrogen deposition

Permanent fencing proposals were then developed which took into account former consultation responses, with Colaton Raleigh and Woodbury Common, the largest and most heavily visited of the Commons sites excluded from proposals at this point. A further background paper was subsequently prepared, and after meetings with the County Council Highways authority and the police, draft maps of fencing lines and cattle grids were proposed and mapped. A further full statutory body and community consultation was then repeated, including with specialist interest groups such as horse riders. Responses were generally in favour of grazing and fencing, with only 5% expressing concerns and 2% objecting. Concerns primarily related to the impact of fencing on the landscape and access.

In 2011 an application was made to the Planning Inspectorate to erect permanent fencing to enclose 469ha of the core area of the Pebblebed Heaths. This included Aylesbeare, Harpford, Hawkerland, Woodbury, Bicton, Lymphstone, East Budleigh and Withycombe Commons. Of these areas, all but Lymphstone and Withycombe Common were owned by Clinton Devon Estates and managed by the Pebblebed heaths Conservation Trust, with Aylesbeare owned by Clinton Devon Estate, but managed on its behalf by the RSPB. The proposal was approved in perpetuity by the Planning Inspectorate in 2012. Full implementation of the proposals would enable 287 hectares (32%) of the Commons managed by the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust to be grazed.

Although Planning Permission has been granted for the permanent enclosure of the Commons areas listed above it was decided in 2013 by the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust, and with approval from Natural England, that a staged approach would be taken of fencing the Commons areas that it manages, with only Bicton Common fenced at this time i.e. 20% of the total area managed. It was felt that such an approach would ensure that legal obligations to return the heaths to a favourable status would be met enabling England to meet its Biodiversity 2020 targets, whilst ensuring a thorough trialling a new management system and enabling public reaction to be gauged. Although temporary grazing with cattle during the summer using electric fences has been occurring in Hawkerland and on Colaton Raleigh Commons for many years, it is recognised that permanent fencing comprises a significant development.

The Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust is legally obliged by European law to maintain the heathlands in a favourable conservation status and take this responsibility very seriously, as we do protecting the landscape beauty of East Devon and maintaining public access to this beautiful but threatened habitat. We believe our existing modest plans strike the right balance between these sometimes conflicting concerns, and consultations undertaken during the planning process suggest that the majority of the users of the commons agree with our approach.

All queries relating to this project should be directed to Dr. Sam Bridgewater, Nature Conservation Manager, Clinton Devon Estates (01395 441143).

Original fencing plans consented by the Planning Inspectorate in 2012

NB. Of those areas managed by the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust (Dalditch, East Budleigh, Bicton, Woodbury, Colaton Raleigh and Hawkerland Commons), only Bicton Common will be fenced at this time.



