

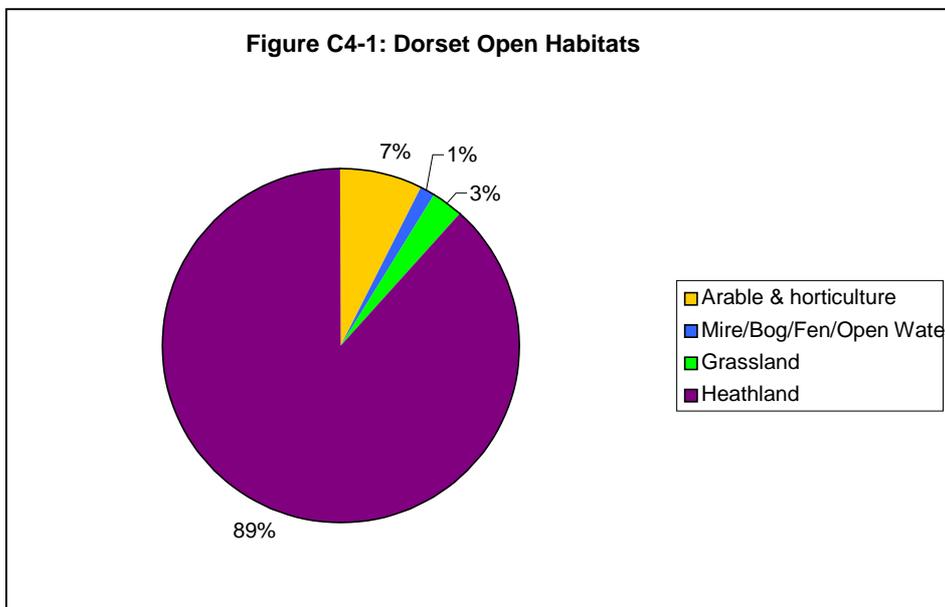
C4 OPEN HABITATS

Restoring and sustaining the area's unique mosaic of open habitats to conserve nature conservation into the future

4.1 INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

The Dorset & South Wiltshire woodlands support a mosaic of open habitats of varying size throughout the woodland blocks covering approximately 1267 ha¹, including:

- ◆ Heathland (1120 ha)
- ◆ Mire/Bog/Fen (16 ha)
- ◆ Open Water (3 ha)
- ◆ Grassland (34 ha)
- ◆ Arable & horticultural land (94 ha)



The aim of developing these habitats is to improve the landscape and biodiversity of the woodlands as well as providing linkages to larger and more contiguous areas of open habitat, particularly designated sites.

¹ Based on analysis of SCDB – August 09

Maintaining open habitats is one of the biggest and most costly challenges with a constant battle being fought against secondary scrub and tree growth and bracken invasion through pulling, cutting, swiping, burning and spraying. The Forestry Commission has built up considerable experience of controlled burning in the New Forest and this is now being translated to Dorset where areas are deemed suitable. The establishment of grazing on many of these areas will be key to restoring and maintaining these habitats to their full ecological potential.

4.2 OPEN HABITAT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES, ISSUES, POLICIES & ACTIONS

Open Habitat Management Objectives

1. To maintain and restore a mosaic of habitats in order to support and enhance the landscape and biodiversity of our open habitats.
2. To develop the extent of open habitats in relation to emerging national and regional policy on open habitats.
3. To carry out targeted monitoring to inform management decisions and to ensure that open habitat management objectives are being achieved.

Issue 1 Protection & enhancement of designated sites

Policy C4-1: We will continue to carry out our obligations as land managers to protect designated sites.

The Forestry Commission as land managers have an obligation under Section 28G of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to take reasonable steps to protect and enhance the SSSI. Under a Public Service Agreement (PSA), 95% of the New Forest/Dorset SSSIs are required to be in favourable or unfavourable recovering condition by 2010. However, not all Heathland SSSI units are currently in favourable or unfavourable recovering condition. A number of actions are required to maintain or improve the condition of these units as highlighted below.

- i. Every effort will be made to achieve our PSA Target for Open habitats by 2010 with works prioritised to target SSSI units currently in unfavourable condition.*
- ii. Development & implementation of Management Plans for SSSI sites.*
- iii. Consultation and liaison with Natural England and other key stakeholders as required.*
- iv. Preparation of Operational Sites Assessments (OSAs) which will take into account works and impact on open habitats.*
- v. Use of GIS based data to assist in monitoring and management of open habitats.*
- vi. Networking with other heathland managers to keep abreast of new research and developments.*

Issue 2 Grazing

Policy C4-2: We will re-introduce grazing to maintain and improve the ecological condition of our heathland and mire habitats.

Maintenance of open habitats to prevent invasion by scrub, birch and bracken or to remove conifer regeneration requires costly and time consuming management operations. Grazing can make a significant contribution to the maintenance of an area as well as helping to enhance the ecological value. There are some wider issues with grazing in terms of the perception by some forest users that it can impinge on access and it is not widely supported by reptile interests. However, the benefits far out weigh the negatives and most issues can be resolved through careful management and liaison. For the success of the open habitat restoration to continue it is essential that grazing units are established where there are significant areas of open habitat requiring maintenance.

Key Actions

- i. Identify the location of grazing units through Forest Design Plans*
- ii. Seek opportunities in conjunction with major projects to derive funding for infrastructure and maintenance necessary to support grazing on heathland/mire habitats.*
- iii. Establish grazing agreements*
- iv. Work with adjacent landowners to establish larger cross boundary grazing units to improve habitat linkages.*
- v. Work with communities & Parish Councils to overcome grazing issues.*

Issue 3 Delivery of the Cut & Burn Programme

Policy C4-3: We will undertake a programme of cutting and controlled burning to maintain a succession of age structures within heathland habitats and to improve grazing.

Controlled Burning is an effective management technique for vegetation control, which provides a number of benefits for habitat management and grazing. The Forestry Commission will continue to give priority to the achievement of an agreed programme of cutting and controlled burning to promote fresh growth of gorse, heather and *molinia* and to control the re-growth of Scots Pine. Cutting is used both in conjunction with burning and as an alternative method of vegetation control. Cutting is carried out using mowing/swiping with a tractor-mounted machine or hand cutting with chainsaws, brush cutters, bow saws or loppers. Cutting is primarily used for controlling pine & birch succession, gorse, willow and general scrub management.

Key Actions

- i. Delivery of a burning program between 1st Nov to 31st March using skilled teams*
- ii. Careful location of fire traces*
- iii. Delivery of cutting programme & mowing of woody species from October to onset of Spring to tackle areas too sensitive to burn, to treat degenerate gorse and cut firebreaks/traces*
- iv. Maintain rotational cutting programme for ride edge habitats.*

Issue 4 Control of Exotics and other alien invasive species

Policy C4-4: It is our aim to control and reduce the spread of Rhododendron and other invasive, exotic species from the open habitats of Dorset and South Wiltshire.

Open habitats are susceptible to colonisation by a number of exotics and undesirable native species. Specific treatments vary from species to species but in many instances removal of non-natives is carried out using a combination of mechanical clearance grubbing out the roots with an excavator and chemical spraying.

In Dorset the key species requiring removal and control is *Rhododendron ponticum*. Rhododendron is a highly invasive shrub, which has negligible nature conservation or browse value. Its dense shade excludes ground flora while its litter and leachates have a sterilising effect on the soil. Large-scale programmes are in progress to tackle Rhododendron.

Key actions

- i. Continue control programme for Rhododendron ponticum.*
- ii. Establish control programme for Gaultheria as funding allows.*
- iii. Continue to follow developments in new technologies for treating persistent pest species and carry out trials where appropriate.*
- iv. Monitor location and spread of any existing or new exotic species.*

Policy C4-5: We will maintain open habitats using a range of techniques to control the spread of birch seedlings and other invasive native woody species and bracken onto open habitats

The restoration of open habitats continues to be threatened by the re-colonisation of birch, pine and other woody species. The survival of gorse brakes may also be endangered by over-shading, whilst heaths may be threatened by the encroachment from existing woodland edges and more widespread colonisation by wind-borne seeding.

Key actions

- i. Implement control programmes to limit the spread of birch seedlings and other invasive native woody species onto open habitats.***
- ii. Undertake scrub control and bracken spraying where necessary***
- iii. Review seasonal restrictions on the timing of treatments in relation to nesting birds e.g. Nightjar***

Issue 5 Restoration & Expansion of Open Habitats

Policy C4-6: We will continue to restore areas of open habitat identified in Forest Design Plans. Further expansion may take place in the light of the emerging FC open habitats policy and regional implementation of the policy.

Restoration of Open Habitats began in the early 1990's under the Forest and Heathland Project, which was a FC Dorset Forest initiative. The first heathland restoration took place in Hurn forest followed by Moredon Bog. This project acted as a catalyst to restore further heathland identified through Forest Design Plans. To date around 1120 hectares of heathland & wooded heath has been restored throughout the East Dorset & Purbeck Heath woodlands.

Current Forest Design Plan concept maps suggest that around another 600 hectares of open habitat is still due to be restored as crops reach their economic maturity. This figure may increase depending upon the outcomes of the Open Habitats Policy.

In recent years, attention has also been given to restoring mires (bogs). When many of the Dorset forests were first established mires were ditched and drained before being planted with trees. Now the trend is restore these mires where practical by removing the trees and blocking the drains to bring the water table back to its natural level.

In Cranborne Chase, there is also scope to restore further areas of Downland in partnership with neighbouring landowners.

Key actions

- i. Continue programme of heathland and mire restoration within SSSIs and other appropriate locations in accordance with Forest Design Plans.***
- ii. Restore areas of downland in locations specified in the Cranborne Chase and North Dorset Woodlands in accordance with Forest Design Plans.***
- iii. Monitor rates of recovery***
- iv. Where possible work with adjacent landowners to restore habitat linkages***

Issue 6 Prevention of uncontrolled fire

Policy C4-7: We will endeavour to protect our heathlands from uncontrolled fire through education programmes to inform the public of the dangers of heathland fires and by working with Dorset Fire & Rescue Service, neighbouring land owners and other relevant groups to maximise fire prevention.

Uncontrolled heathland fires can be very damaging to heathland communities and pose a danger to both to people and property. In the summer months the heathlands are vulnerable to both accidental fires and arson attacks.

Key Actions

- i. Revision and updating of the fire plan*
- ii. Working closely with local Fire & Rescue Service and Urban Heaths Partnership to prevent fires*
- iii. Work in partnership with other organisations to reduce anti-social behaviour and increase public awareness.*
- iv. Managing the structure of heathlands to help control fire through the maintenance of a diverse vegetation structure, fire breaks and good access for fire fighting.*

Issue 8 Survey, monitoring & research

Policy C4-8: Surveying and monitoring will be strategically planned to provide targeted information to help inform open habitat management decisions and address areas of particular concern.

Monitoring is an important tool to ensure that our heathland management techniques are working effectively and to steer future management. Due to finite resources, future surveying and monitoring needs to be strategically planned to provide targeted, accessible information to inform heathland management decisions. It is important that monitoring data is compiled and stored in a form that can be used by land managers.

Key actions

- i. Strategic planning of Monitoring Programme to fit with national monitoring protocols*
- ii. Review of existing monitoring data/programmes*
- iii. Continued support for student projects*
- iv. Build relationships with other bodies gathering data on the Forest*
- v. Promote exemplar, best practise*

Issue 9 Impacts of climate change on Open Habitats

Policy C4-9: We will monitor the impacts of climate change on our Open Habitats and adapt our practices as required.

Climate change has a number of potential impacts upon heathland management, particularly in relation to seasonal changes, which affect activities such as burning, where sensitive thresholds apply. For example spring seems to have been coming earlier and this is indeed reflected in the climate statistics with March showing an average temperature rise of 0.55°C between the climate averages based on data from 1961 to 1990 and 1971 to 2000. This temperature rise is resulting in an earlier nesting season and earlier emergence of reptiles from hibernation which, is already having significant implications for the window of opportunity in which to undertake the annual burn programme and other operations

Although research is emerging on the various impacts of climate change, it is not yet clear exactly what climate change scenarios will emerge and what the precise impacts will be on heathland communities will be.

Key actions

- i. Keep up to date with findings of research and national advice.*
- ii. Adapt management practises in response to climate change as necessary.*