

The Northern Devon Nature Improvement Area (NIA) is an active, ambitious partnership of 15 organisations working on the river Torridge catchment, led by Devon Wildlife Trust. We are working towards bigger and better quality areas of Culm grassland, woodland and river habitat, better water quality, and more wildlife habitat re-created and re-connected by landowners and local people. We are also seeking to strengthen the connections between people and this deeply rural landscape, promoting better understanding of the ecosystem services it provides.

Embracing the greater part of the river Torridge catchment and covering 72,324 hectares, the Northern Devon NIA holds 35% of the UK resource of **Culm grassland**, a variety of purple moor-grass and rush pasture, surviving in vulnerable fragments. **Broadleaved woodland** is difficult to access and often neglected. River Torridge **water quality** is poor, largely due to high levels of phosphates and sediment. The landscape supports many key species, including two of Europe's top ten threatened species: marsh fritillary and freshwater pearl mussel.

Re-connecting habitats in the river Torridge catchment

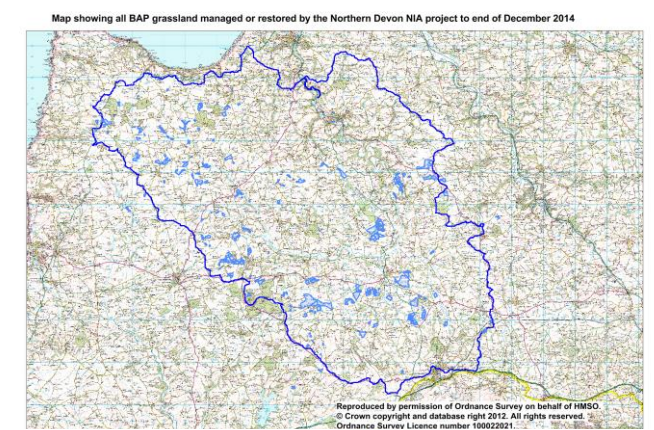
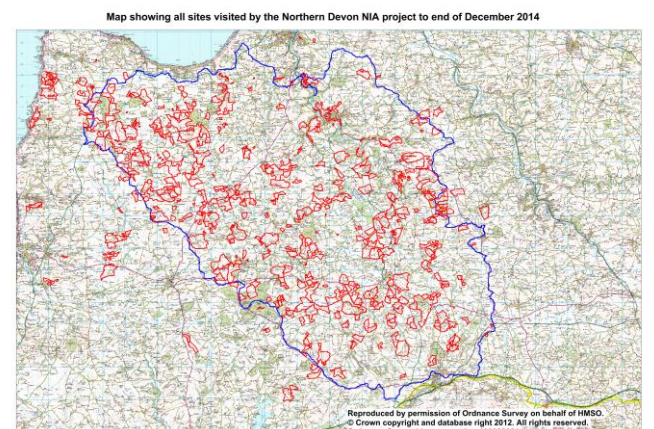
Since April 2012, the NIA's achievements include:

- Over 1500 hectares of Culm grassland and associated habitats under restoration management
- 81 hectares of new grassland and woodland habitat created
- 106 km of hedgerow restored
- 96 km of riverside land brought into positive management
- A clearer picture of existing marsh fritillary populations and connections between them

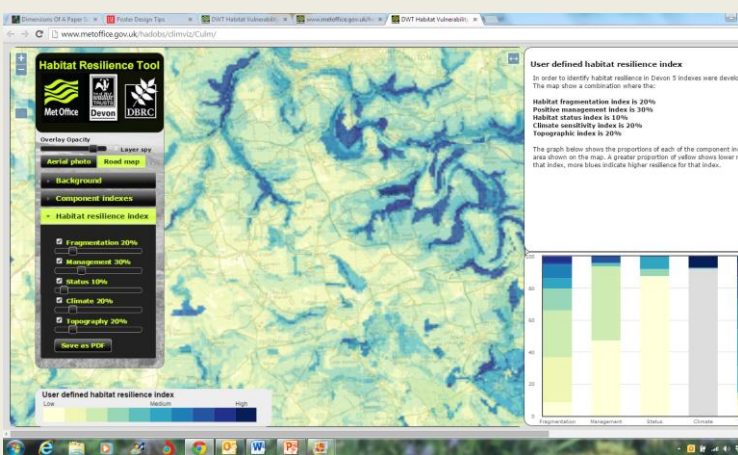
This has been achieved through a team of NIA advisors, providing specialised 1:1 advice to farmers and landowners, helping them to secure grants for site management (Environmental Stewardship / Woodland Grant Scheme / local capital grants) and assisting with specialist machinery and grazing requirements. In its first three years, the NIA provided over 1000 advisory site visits to 291 different land holdings (21% of the project area).

The NIA has made significant effort to target land management advice in a way which increases habitat connectivity. This has been assisted by good data availability, and increased collaboration between land use advisors from different organisations, facilitated by the NIA. Our indicator for connectivity gives us a long term index to monitor progress in achieving habitat connections across the landscape.

However, achieving a connected ecological network of habitats across a large river catchment will take time, resources (grants), and the consistent promotion of high quality land management advice. Stronger local influence over the targeting of agri-environment grants would allow the NIA to be even more effective.



Local knowledge, looking ahead: the Habitat Resilience Tool



This is a ground breaking application that combines state of the art technology employed by the Met Office alongside knowledge and information on our environment held by Devon Wildlife Trust and Devon Biodiversity Records Centre. The NIA has made a significant contribution to its development.

The purpose of this tool is to help you to understand the resilience of current wildlife habitat across Devon, on the basis of fragmentation, management, site designation status, topography and climate.

The Habitat Resilience Tool is ideally suited to anyone involved in making decisions that affect our environment, from supporting conservation measures for a species through to land use planning and green infrastructure. It will be invaluable to NIA partners in developing increasingly focused targeting of advice with fewer resources in the future.

The Habitat Resilience Tool can be found at <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/hadobs/climviz/Culm/>

Connecting people and wildlife

Through three part time community outreach specialists, the NIA has been exploring ways to increase the connections between the population of the river Torridge catchment and their landscape.

So far the NIA has delivered over 100 community events, 52 school visits to wildlife habitat and farms, the development of a teachers' pack on local ecosystem services, 6 citizen science projects and 34 biodiversity volunteering tasks. We have found that identifying and accessing 'pathfinders' (champions) in communities of place or interest is key to developing meaningful initiatives at the parish level that have true buy-in.

