

English Nature Research Report 602

Ashdown Forest Grazing Action Plan

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Introduction

Ashdown Forest Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC), and Special Protection Area (SPA) covers 3144ha of heathland and woodland on the High Weald in East Sussex. The majority of this (2467ha) is managed by the Board of Conservators, established by the Ashdown Forest Act 1885.

In 1998, road-side fences were erected on Ashdown Forest to allow 547 ha to be grazed by free-ranging sheep and cattle. In ecological terms, this renewed grazing has been successful and the Conservators now wish to extend the grazing to other heathland areas. This report was commissioned to investigate the options by which extended grazing might be introduced.

What was done

- The options for ownership, type, husbandry, density and effect of different grazing animals are examined.
- Various options for constraining the grazing animals within the Ashdown Forest boundary, such as hefting and fencing, are explored.
- Widespread consultation with other conservation organisations that have grazing schemes in place was carried out.
- A literature search, particularly aimed at management rather than research.
- Assessment of the existing Ashdown Forest grazing, including consultation with existing graziers.
- Consultation with East Sussex County Council (ESCC) highways department.
- An estimate of likely costs and potential funding sources are set out.
- A series of recommendations are made on best methods of extending the grazing across Ashdown Forest.

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Results and conclusions

Grazing is an invaluable tool for the sustainable ecological management of lowland heathland. Also, the landscape of the Forest is, in most people's eyes, enhanced by the presence of grazing domestic animals. The Conservators have previously agreed that grazing should be extended in so far as there is the option to safely introduce livestock onto all the open areas of the Forest. The problems of re-introducing livestock onto common land are well-known (ironical, given that the common exists only due to the grazing offered over past centuries!) and they are explored fully in this report. Some solutions are also suggested, though they are disappointingly familiar - there does not appear to be any innovative solution to the problem of separating animals from cars. New fencing will be required.

The acquisition and husbandry of livestock are also explored. There are a limited number of animals which could be diverted immediately from the existing grazing scheme into any new enclosure. This would represent a short-term solution while the Conservators determine whether or not to become stockholders in their own right. Eventually, if grazing is to become as extensive as this work suggests, the Conservators will want to have direct control over at least part of the grazing herd.

The extension of grazing on the Forest is described fully in this report but implementation will proceed in a piecemeal fashion, dictated firstly by approval for fencing being granted by the Secretary of State and then by the Conservators' access to resources such as additional livestock, in-bye land and man-power. Additional grazing will also be contingent on the success of the existing grazing, as determined by the results of ecological monitoring and public perception.

Consultation with a number of heathland wildlife site managers has shown that many are determined to introduce grazing. In every case, these managers are experiencing difficulties and it is a measure of how valuable they consider grazing to be that they continue. The Conservators will also face difficulties in the short term, but once grazing is made possible, the future of the Forest heathland will be more certain.

English Nature's viewpoint

This report has set out the challenges involved with extending the grazing at Ashdown Forest. More importantly it has reviewed experience from others, drawn lessons from these experiences, and set out a series of sensible and practical approaches to achieving extended grazing. As such it will be an invaluable tool in the re-introduction of grazing animals to Ashdown Forest, an internationally important heathland

Selected references

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Further information

For the full report or other publications on this subject, please contact the Enquiry Service on 01733 455100/101/102 or email enquiries@english-nature.org.uk

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