

Dorset National Park - Short Case Study Series

To supplement evidence submitted in 2013, 2014 and 2018 on the environment, heritage and biodiversity, and the recreational opportunities in the proposed National Park.



7. National Parks and their Environment

2019 is the 70th year since the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act brought into being our National Parks. In England there are currently ten NPs and the Government's Glover Review of designated landscapes is considering whether to recommend the creation of new ones. National Parks help conserve and enhance some of our most beautiful landscapes and cultural heritage. They promote health, well-being and recreation and foster the economic and social well-being of their local communities. They are national assets admired and visited by people from Britain and around the world.

National Parks are home to many nationally and internationally important and increasingly threatened species. But they and other areas of the country face an uphill struggle. The State of Nature 2016 found that 56% of UK species declined between 1970 and 2013. It concluded that policy-driven changes to agriculture had been the most significant driver of biodiversity loss (Hayhow et al 2016). The Government's own biodiversity indicators demonstrate similar trends and suggest that the declines are continuing (Defra 2018).

Farming has shaped all of our National Parks over the centuries. It is not therefore surprising that the agricultural changes that have driven biodiversity loss in the wider landscape have also affected our National Parks. "Areas of semi-natural habitat have been lost or fragmented as a result of agricultural "improvements" such as the reseedling of grasslands, use of pesticides and artificial fertilisers, increased use of machinery, enlargement and levelling of fields and the switch from hay to silage production." In comparison to high productivity farming, lower-intensity farming, however, can provide higher levels of local employment (including through the reuse of redundant buildings for workspaces and farm shops) and more added value products (specialist breeds and the use of milk for specialist cheeses or ice-cream for example), and a range of eco-system services such as carbon storage and the provision of clean water.

Owing to lack of data, it is difficult to establish how trends in National Parks compare with those nationally. Various commentators have suggested that there is a need for a robust and well-resourced monitoring system to help assess and track changes in the environment generally and in our national parks. One aim of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan published by Defra is to establish such improved metrics and monitoring. One key indicator for which data exist is the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Natural England's official monitoring data indicate that nationally only some 26% of SSSIs by area within National Parks are in a favourable condition compared with 43.5% of those outside National Parks. But this overall figure hides a wide range of performance as the following table produced by the RSPB using data from Natural England suggests.



Image courtesy of Rob Jayne



Images courtesy of Ian Duckworth

National Park	Total Area (ha)	% of NP designated as SSSI	% of SSSI in favourable condition
Dartmoor	95,603	27%	16%
Exmoor	69,341	28%	15%
Lake District	236,568	18%	23%
New Forest	56,693	57%	52%
North Yorkshire Moors	144,194	33%	11%
Northumberland	105,171	12%	32%
Peak District	143,889	35%	16%
South Downs	123,279	8%	47%
The Broads	30,130	24%	63%
Yorkshire Dales	218,642	23%	28%

This shows that it is the upland National Parks that have a particularly poor record. The percentage of SSSIs in a favourable condition in the lowland National Parks in the south of England - the New Forest, South Downs and the Broads - is considerably higher than in upland National Parks and also higher than the national average for all SSSIs.

In the uplands, the management of moorland for the shooting of driven grouse is a dominant land use. This involves burning moorland vegetation to promote the fresh shoots the grouse prefer, predator control and the control of disease through the provision of medicated grit and the use of sheep as tick-mops (Thompson et al 2016). The intensive burning of vegetation is evidently also having a negative impact on the hydrology, water quality, carbon-storage capacity, habitat condition and biodiversity of the upland eco-system (Brown et al 2015, Douglas et al 2015)

Agri-environment schemes are the major policy mechanism for effecting change in land management. The proposed new Environmental Land Management System (ELMS) aims to pay farmers and land managers for delivering public goods and in particular environmental enhancement. This aims to provide a key way to support the delivery of many of the environmental aims set out in the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan. There are also already many pioneering partnership initiatives for promoting and supporting landscape scale conservation in our National Parks. The South Downs National Park's proposed ELMS pilot, for example, aims to provide a range of benefits. These include agri-environment solutions which take full account of farmer expertise and ideas to improve productivity and resilience, enhance participating farm incomes and reduce costs. The proposed scheme has the support of both the CLA and NFU.



Images courtesy of Simon Kidner

National Parks can be living, working landscapes where rural businesses thrive, local and affordable homes are built for local people, as well as where species decline can be halted and reversed, habitats created, restored and reconnected and eco-system services enhanced for the benefit of those outside as well as within their areas. This should be an aim of the proposed Dorset & East Devon National Park which should also promote joined-up thinking, partnership working and landscape scale conservation working across boundaries. It can take this approach to a new level both on-shore and off-shore. The environment is a system and effective management, conservation and enhancement of the environment and biodiversity needs a systems approach. This is not only good for the environment and biodiversity but also for consumers and producers of ecosystems services, making essential services like high quality water supplies cheaper, more reliable and sustainable.

Acknowledgements

This short paper owes much to an article by Kevin Cox (Chair of the RSPB and also a resident and landowner in Dartmoor National Park) and his colleagues Alice Groom, Kate Jennings and Isobel Mercer in *British Wildlife* vol 30, no 2, December 2018.

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