

Proposed Dorset and East Devon National Park

Evidence and Sources used to support the Proposal

Theme: Farming

Overview

Farming has been practised in Dorset and East Devon since the earliest times of human occupation and settlement. Though the farming sector's direct significance for the area's economy and employment has reduced in modern times, farming remains fundamental to the natural beauty, biodiversity and recreational attraction of Dorset and East Devon, and therefore of great relevance to the area's economy through tourism.

Most importantly, farming and land management play an important part in the area's ecological health and diversity. The farming, landowning and rural business communities are engaged, through Local Nature Partnerships and AONBs' Partnership working, in the discussion of a range of land stewardship schemes and initiatives.

The proposed National Park, working with the farming and landowning community and all stakeholders, has the potential to:

- Become a catalyst and beacon for action to promote sustainability through a wide range of policies and functions, including land use and management for climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Help communities and businesses, including farmers and landowners, to make the most of the economic and environmental developments and challenges on the horizon, and take advantage of the opportunities these would present.

A brief history of farming in Dorset and East Devon

Farming has been practised in Dorset and East Devon since the earliest times of human occupation and settlement. Archaeological evidence of Neolithic occupation – when men first adapted from being hunter-gatherers to becoming hunter-gardeners – has been found, for example, at Worth Matravers in Purbeck and at other sites.

Areas of forest and woodland were cleared for agriculture. Cereals for bread-making were ground on stone hand-querns to make coarse flour. By the pre-Roman period, farming in Dorset was thriving, and cereals were being exported to the continent.

The sites of Iron Age farmsteads have been excavated along the ancient ridgeway route of the "Priest's Way" in Purbeck. Evidence of late Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon farming is found widely in the visible pattern of so-called "Celtic" field systems and farmsteads in the Dorset landscape.

In the mediaeval period, the land was divided into manors and into hundreds for administrative purposes. The Domesday Survey of 1086 documents changes in the ownership and tenancy of land following the Norman Conquest. Intended to provide an inventory of assets and wealth for taxation purposes, the Survey paints a picture of Dorset's estates and farms based on a mixture of woodland, livestock and agricultural activity, together with mills on the county's many rivers and streams. Small-scale quarrying activity, from the mediaeval to modern period, was often practised alongside farming where high quality building stone was accessible, as in Purbeck. Parts of Dorset were favoured for royal hunting, from Powerstock in the West to Purbeck in the East.

Land which, at the time of the Domesday Survey, was owned by the Crown or, through the mediaeval period, was owned by large monastic estates such as Cerne Abbas or Sherborne, passed into the ownership of private estates by or during the C16th. Some of the families which acquired estates in Dorset during the C16 and C17th have continued to own and farm these estates to the present day, contributing to the maintenance of a landscape of family-owned and run farms, estates, and parkland, with fine houses and manors dating to this period. Family-run estates include the Ilchester, Lulworth, Smedmore and Encombe estates. The large Bankes estate, bought by the Bankes family in the 1630s, was left to the National Trust in the 1980s. The Duchy of Cornwall owns farms around Maiden Castle near Dorchester.

The area's rural prosperity suffered successive blows during the C19th as free trade and imports reduced the price of basic foodstuffs, to the benefit of Britain's newly industrialised and urbanised populations, but to the impoverishment of the farms and farm workers of preponderantly rural counties like Dorset. The farmworkers of Tolpuddle, who went on strike over low wages and were convicted to spend several years in Australia, are commemorated in the Tolpuddle Martyrs museum. The society and landscape of Dorset's agricultural depression are described in Thomas Hardy's works.

Although the economies of Dorset and East Devon have diversified, and tourism in particular has become a major economic sector, most of the area remains rural in character. The introduction of modern farming methods, and the amalgamation of smaller farms, means that there are now far fewer farmers. Many farmers have diversified into other enterprises and activities to help make farms profitable and to provide other services – including local food products and recreational activities - to visitors and local communities. But farming in Dorset and East Devon remain vital not only to the economy of rural areas, but to ensuring and conserving the beauty of the landscape and the area's internationally recognised biodiversity.

Farming Today

The internationally recognised importance of the landscapes and biodiversity of Dorset and East Devon places a particular responsibility on the farming sector in this area to work closely and constructively with partners, in the public, private and voluntary sectors, to help conserve and enhance the natural heritage.

Climate change and its implications represent a challenge facing all stakeholders in the countryside. The need to address climate change features strongly in 'The Natural Choice', the Natural Environment White Paper (June 2011,) the Biodiversity 2020 Strategy (July 2011,) and in the forward planning and commitments of Natural England.

At the same time, economic difficulties, nationally and internationally, present uncertainties and challenges for farmers and landowners, as schemes of assistance for land stewardship are reviewed and developed.

The proposed National Park, working with the farming community and all stakeholders, has the potential to:

- Become a catalyst and beacon for action to promote sustainability through a wide range of policies and functions, including land use and management for climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Help communities and businesses, including farmers and landowners, to make the most of the economic and environmental developments and challenges on the horizon, and take advantage of the opportunities these would present.

Local Nature Partnerships are a new approach to partnership working, set out in the Government's Natural Environment White Paper 2011. Defra's ambition for LNPs is that they will help their local area to manage the natural environment as a system and to embed its value in local decisions for the benefit of nature, people and the economy. LNPs are expected to work together with Local Enterprise Partnerships. The Dorset LNP, at its first stakeholder conference in October 2012, aimed at involving a wide range of stakeholders from environment, community, social and economic sectors to build a shared vision for the LNP and to identify and develop high level priorities for the LNP.

There are encouraging examples of farmers and landowners who embrace with enthusiasm their role as guardians and ambassadors of the countryside. On the National Trust's extensive Bankes estate in Purbeck, the Trust works with farmers to promote the conservation, enhancement and guardianship of the natural environment, to promote access and enjoyment, and to make the most of opportunities to gain recognition for and add value to high quality farm products such as organic meats and local cheeses.

The National Trust has its own award scheme, which has been won by Purbeck farmer Paul Loudon, tenant of the Trust-owned, historic Wilkswood farm [a Benedictine monastery in pre-Reformation times.] Paul, who says "Everything I do on my farm is conservation," is, like the National Trust, a strong supporter of the proposed evaluation of the case for a Dorset and East Devon National Park. Paul welcomes the opportunities a National Park would present for farmers, along with others, to do more and do better for the National Park area and its natural assets.

On the Duchy of Cornwall's Dorset estate, farmer John Hoskin of Maiden Castle Farms near Dorchester is one of 12 Southern Counties Fresh Foods champion farmers. This award recognises many achievements: John's outstanding approach to beef production, advocacy for working with others in the food chain, innovation in diversification, proactive communication with consumers, high environmental standards and strong welfare management, lifetime commitment to supporting other farmers in best practice, engagement of his whole family and the next generation in the business, and his doubled profitability over a five year period.

Landowners and farmers are keen that farming should be perceived as a positive force for the environment and as making a significant contribution to the countryside and British wildlife. This has been emphasised recently in the context of the launch by environmental organisations of the 'State of Nature' report, which suggests 60% of species included in the study have declined during recent years.

The NFU has pointed to farmer support for initiatives such as the industry-led Campaign for the Farmed Environment, and Defra stewardship schemes (which nationally include more than 50,000 agreements.) The NFU also argued that farmers are managing their environmental footprint - for example reducing pesticide pollution by up to a third in sensitive water catchment and greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture by 19%. The challenge the report offers is to find ways in which farming can continue to produce high quality British food, be a positive force in the countryside and support the nation's wildlife.

The Role of the AONBs

Both Dorset and East Devon AONBs work with Natural England and with representatives of the farming, landowning and rural business communities, to provide a forum for the provision of information about and discussion of farming and land stewardship schemes.

The aims of such funded schemes are:

- To make sure land is well managed and keeps its traditional character.
- To protect England's historic features and natural resources.
- To look after wildlife, species and their habitats.

- To ensure traditional livestock and crops are conserved for the future.
- To provide opportunities for the public, families and schools to visit and learn about the countryside.

The advice and information available to farmers, landowners and rural business partners includes the following topics:

- Farm visits and events: advice and information through farm walks, workshops, clinics and farm visits.
- Organic conversion advice: advice on the practicalities of converting to organic production.
- England Catchment Sensitive Farming Delivery Initiative: aims to reduce the pollution of surface-water bodies caused by farming operations.
- Environmental Stewardship and Agri-environment developments: information on transition to the next programme and development of a new scheme.

Dorset AONB

The Dorset AONB illustrates the significance of farming and land management to the character and quality of such an area of outstanding landscape beauty, important habitats and rich biodiversity.

“Over 80% of the Dorset AONB is farmland, and it's largely the history of farming that has shaped and maintained this beautiful landscape. Farm types are as various as the landscape reflecting the soil types and terrain. The best agricultural land in the AONB is in the Brit Valley near Bridport which supports horticulture, important for the local markets as well as sales out of the area. Sheep and cattle grazing is usual for the steepest and/or wettest areas, as well as the very infertile heathlands. Grazing these areas is essential to maintain their wildlife, and farmers of this land are often eligible for environmental grants to continue. Dairy farming is common where the land is more fertile and easily cultivated, as is arable farming. Just under half of the AONB is arable; wheat and barley are the main crops. There are a number of orchards (many for cider) and an increasing area planted to vines - perhaps Dorset will be a famous wine area before long! Farming patterns change according to markets and policy. Current trends are a reduction in the numbers of dairy farms and falling numbers of beef cattle and sheep. This is a concern for the landscape: the grasslands that this type of farming maintains is an essential part of the AONB's natural beauty.”

Current and Recent Initiatives

The following initiatives by the Dorset AONB illustrate their work to support farming and to assist farmers to play a positive role in the environment.

Dorset's Outstanding Grasslands: “Pastures New,” 2006 - 2009

“The **Pastures New Project** has been successful in getting some of our best grassland for wildlife back into good management - helping to conserve the fantastic butterflies, insects and wildflowers they support.” [Report: Pastures New, 2006-2009.]

Agriculturally unimproved grasslands are nationally valuable because of the wildlife they support. They once covered much larger areas of the country, but now remain as smaller fragments. They have evolved over thousands of years, shaped by early agricultural practices. They are now a refuge for once-common plants and animals that have become dependent upon traditional farming practices.

All unimproved grassland types are important in Britain, but the country holds much of the world's resource of chalk grassland, and is internationally recognised for this. Major concentrations are found

in Wiltshire, Dorset and the South Downs, and despite dramatic losses in recent years, Dorset has outstanding and important grasslands, representing around 10% of the UK's total.

Such grasslands are part of the natural heritage and represent important habitats. Unimproved grasslands are difficult to recreate, but there are opportunities for increasing the wildlife value of grassland without limiting its productivity.

In Dorset, grasslands are a major feature in the beautiful landscape. The county boasts steep chalky banks, flower-rich clay meadows, wet grasslands in river valleys, and lush green dairy pastures. Most important for wildlife are those which have not been agriculturally improved through ploughing or the addition of fertilizers.

These grasslands have evolved from ancient origins and have been maintained by centuries of traditional management such as grazing or hay-making. They support a wide range of plant and animal species, and are often rich in wildflowers.

'Pastures New' was an ambitious initiative which brought together farmers and wildlife experts to restore wildlife-rich grasslands across the county. Led by the Dorset AONB and Dorset Biodiversity Partnership, the project provided land managers with advice, assistance and incentives to make grassland management more economically viable.

Pastures New was first developed as part of Dorset's government-endorsed Local Area Agreement. The inclusion of environmental targets reflected the importance that Dorset people place on caring for the county's landscape and wildlife.

The first phase of this project is complete and met the ambitious targets set. The partnership achieved this by providing:

- Advice on grassland management and grant availability through Environmental Stewardship Volunteers and contractors to clear scrub, erect fences, and install water supplies to facilitate conservation management
- A service to provide graziers with appropriate grassland sites with grazing expertise, advice and assistance in enhancing grassland sites for biodiversity
- 'Added value' by linking producers with the 'Direct from Dorset' accreditation scheme, and establishing a conservation grade meat scheme.

Dorset's Woodlands: Woodlink

Dorset's woodlands are important to the beautiful landscape, the communities that live in it and the wildlife that woodlands support. Dorset AONB leads the Woodlink partnership project that works to promote healthy, managed woodlands, providing a range of benefits to the environment, local economy and local communities across the county.

The Woodlink project works with woodland owners, community groups and the woodland industry to ensure a sustainable future of Dorset's woods and forests, which cover over 10% of the land area.

The Woodlink Partners are:

- Dorset Coppice Group

- Dorset Wildlife Trust
- Natural England
- Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
- Forestry Commission
- Dorset Environmental Records Centre
- Dorset County Council
- Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB
- Local Authority Tree Officers

Dorset Food and Drink

July 2013 sees the launch in Poundbury, at the Dorset Festival 2013, of a new initiative to promote Dorset's many locally sourced and made food and drink products.

"A brand new organisation for everyone proud to be growing, making, selling, serving, supporting and buying Dorset food and drink: Dorset Food and Drink.

From artisan producers to world class brands; from heritage breed farmers to leading food innovators; from local tea shops to Michelin-starred restaurants, Dorset's food and drink culture has much to celebrate.

The initiative will include: news and events, local food & drink directory, special offers direct from producers, suggestions for places to stay or visit to enjoy Dorset food and drink, and a trade membership scheme."

Sources include:

Dorset AONB website and publications

East Devon AONB website and publications

Natural England website and publications

NFU website and publications

CLA website and publications

Dorset Environmental Record Centre: Dorset Biodiversity Audit, 2003

National Trust: Purbeck estate

Dorset and East Devon National Park Group

June 2013