

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.



4. The Purbeck Heathlands

Background

The National Trust's Playing our Part strategy was adopted in 2015 and identifies 'Restoring a beautiful, healthy natural environment' as a key aim for the organisation. This recognises the role that the NT has in implementing the Lawton recommendations **to create better, bigger, more and joined habitats for nature.**

The NT's Purbeck Estate has long been a flagship Trust property for delivering nature conservation. In 2016 we adopted a vision for landscape scale conservation that will ensure that by working with partners, neighbours and local communities our land plays an integral role in a joined-up landscape that is healthy, rich in wildlife and culture, productive, beautiful and enjoyed by all. It builds on the legacy of the Wild Purbeck Nature Improvement Area (NIA) partnership.

Land, Outdoors and Nature identifies a vision for each of the distinct landscapes within Purbeck: the heathlands, the chalk ridge, the South Purbeck coast and the Purbeck vale. For each area we have identified priorities to improve the value of our land for nature, but also the opportunities to put people at the heart of this. We will do this through partnerships and by working with local communities; by supporting our farm tenants and by recognising the importance of Purbeck's landscape to the quality of life of millions of people each year.

Purbeck's Heathlands

Lowland heaths were formed around 5,000 years ago when tree cover was removed by early settlers to farm them. Situated on generally poor and acid soils they were then sustained through a wide range of land management practices, including grazing, cutting of gorse for fuel and bracken for animal bedding, small-scale burning to create pasture, peat cutting and mineral extraction. The resulting dynamic mosaic of habitats sustained a rich and highly specialist wildlife for which southern Britain is uniquely important. However, agricultural intensification, commercial afforestation and building development has led to the loss of around 80% of England's lowland heaths since 1800.

Purbeck still retains some of the country's best and most biodiverse lowland heaths, but they are now isolated, fragmented and managed separately by different organisations. Although habitat is no longer being lost, **many species are still in decline** thanks to a lack of the traditional management practices that many specialist species depend on, and the lack of connectivity to enable them to move and colonise new areas.

In recent years partners and neighbours have been working together to restore and reconnect areas, and the Trust has played its part in this by restoring heathlands from dairy pasture and conifer plantations. With around 5,000 hectares of almost contiguous land over seven land ownerships now in conservation management, **we are ready to start managing as a landscape rather than as a series of isolated sites.**

Our aim is to develop a joint approach to everything from monitoring to grazing to visitor management, allowing natural processes to dictate what the land looks and feels like and creating an open landscape in which people feel welcome and inspired.

Partners are brought together through the Wild Purbeck Nature Improvement Area partnership. We have worked particularly closely with Natural England and the RSPB to manage our contiguous sites as one unit; but the wider vision for the heathlands also includes the Forestry Commission, the Dorset Wildlife Trust, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, and several private landowners, while the AONB team have played an active supporting role.

Progress so far

Improving the condition of the heaths: Until the 1990s, our heaths looked beautiful but hadn't been properly grazed for decades: they had become uniform and diversity was declining. Establishing our own herd of Red Devon cattle around our flagship sites (Studland & Godlingston Heath in the east, Hartland Moor in the west) has brought back some of the disturbance and structural diversity our heaths needed.

We can only properly look after our most complex and nature-rich sites if we know what is there and understand the ecology.

We've been building partnerships in the local naturalist community since 2013 and have established a team of skilled volunteer naturalists. Between them they have recorded over 5,000 species across all taxa and have begun regularly monitoring the status of our most important habitats and species. We have incorporated this detailed understanding into new management plans as part of our drive towards more evidence-based management.

Restoring more and bigger heaths: In 1982 the estate we were bequeathed included some of the country's finest lowland heath; but also areas where heathland had been destroyed and turned to dairy pasture. We have been restoring these ever since, and after 35 years of extensive grazing and zero inputs, our core heaths are now surrounded by a mosaic of species-rich acid grasslands that are on their way back to heath. Since 2014 we have acquired a further 90 ha of adjacent conifer plantation and pasture that we are also restoring as heath.

Joining heaths up across the landscape: Other landowners have got on board with the vision for the Purbeck heaths. Perhaps most notably, the Forestry Commission's Forest Design Plan now sets out plans to restore over 70% of their land as heaths, connecting the Purbeck Heaths from east to west.

The future

We are working with RSPB and NE to remove the fences between our sites and manage as a single large, extensive grazing unit. We now have much of the funding in place and hope to have all agreements ready to start in 2019. We are also working with NE to declare a new, larger National Nature Reserve (NNR) that will encompass around 5000 ha of heathlands and associated habitats, across seven different ownerships. As part of this national flagship scheme, we will produce a joint visitor management strategy for the whole NNR - making it more inspiring for more people, but also protecting the landscape from people where it needs protecting. We are also playing a leading role in monitoring priority species across the whole area, working to develop our ecology volunteers into a resource for the whole of Purbeck.

Our Land, Outdoors and Nature work will make a direct contribution to the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan and Natural England's Conservation 21 strategy. **In Purbeck we aim to work in partnership to restore a beautiful, healthy environment for nature and people at a landscape scale: as such we are already helping deliver the vision that the proposed Dorset National Park seeks to promote.**



Image of Stoborough Heath; courtesy of Mark Bauer