

UK Biodiversity Action Plan for Lowland Heathland

Current Status

Lowland heathland is characterised by the presence of plants such as heather, dwarf gorses, and cross-leaved heath and is generally found below 300 metres in altitude. Areas of good quality heathland should consist of an ericaceous layer of varying heights and structures, some areas of scattered trees and scrub, areas of bare ground, gorse, wet heaths, bogs and open water. The presence and numbers of characteristic birds, reptiles, invertebrates, vascular plants, bryophytes and lichens are important indicators of habitat quality.

Lowland heathland is a priority for nature conservation because it is a rare and threatened habitat. In England only one sixth of the heathland present in 1800 now remains. The UK has some 58,000 ha of lowland heathland of which the largest proportion (55%) is found in England. The most significant areas for lowland heathland include the counties of Hampshire, Cornwall, Dorset, Surrey, Devon, Staffordshire, Suffolk, Norfolk, Pembrokeshire, West Glamorgan and west Gwynedd. The UK has an important proportion (about 20%) of the international total of this habitat.

Current factors affecting the habitat

In the past heathland was lost primarily to agriculture, forestry, mineral extraction and development. Uncontrolled burning has also been a particular threat to bryophyte and lichen-rich heathland. The main factors affecting the habitat at present are:

- Encroachment of trees and scrub and the simplification of vegetation structure due to a lack of conservation management such as light grazing, controlled burning and cutting.
- Nutrient enrichment, particularly deposition of nitrogen compounds emitted from intensive livestock farming, or from other sources.
- Fragmentation and disturbance from developments such as housing and road constructions.
- Agricultural improvement including reclamation and overgrazing, especially in Northern Ireland.

Current Action

Legal status

Through the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, a large proportion of the lowland heathland habitat has been notified as SSSI.

Management, research and guidance

The Countryside Stewardship scheme included 9,413 ha of lowland heathland in England by March 1994. This is the only country-wide heathland management and re-creation scheme. A number of counties in England, however, have heathland management projects which receive financial support through EN's National Lowland Heathland Programme. A number of other bodies including the National Trust, MoD, County Wildlife Trusts and RSPB are also actively involved in heathland management and the Forestry Authority is promoting heathland regeneration within woodlands. The CCW is carrying out a lowland heathland survey in Wales to identify all the remaining important sites and improve management and protection. A survey of the distribution, extent and condition of lowland heathland in Scotland is required.

Management of lowland heathland is carried out through EN's Wildlife Enhancement Scheme which is expected to cover 9,000 ha of heathland by 1997; management agreements are negotiated with SNH over SSSIs containing lowland heathland and also through MAFF's ESAs, notably in Breckland and West Penwith in Cornwall. In Northern Ireland some lowland heath is managed within DAN's ESAs.

Action plan objectives and targets

Maintain the extent of all existing lowland heathland (58,000 ha).

Improve by management all existing lowland heathland currently in unfavourable condition.

Encourage the re-establishment by 2005 of a further 6,000 ha of heathland with the emphasis on the counties of Hampshire, Cornwall, Dorset, Surrey, Devon, Staffordshire, Suffolk and Norfolk in England and Pembrokeshire, Glamorgan and west Gwynedd in Wales, particularly where this links separate heathland areas.

Proposed actions with lead agencies

Policy and legislation

Where significant gaps in the SSSI/ASSI coverage of lowland heathland are identified the appropriate SSSI/ASSI procedure should be implemented by 1998. (Action: CCW, DoE(NI) EN, SNH)

Consider expanding Countryside Stewardship, Tir Cymen (now Tir Gofal), ESA and WES to meet the targets for heathland and management and re-creation. Determine the applicability of a new scheme similar to Countryside Stewardship for Scotland. (ACTION: CCW, DANI, EN, MAFF, SNH, SO, WOAD)

Take account of the conservation requirements of lowland heathland in developing and adjusting agri-environment schemes. (ACTION: DANI, MAFF, SOAEFD, WOAD)

Simplify the process for submission of applications to the Secretary of State to fence lowland heathland that is common land for grazing, to maintain its wildlife interest. (ACTION: DoE, WO)

In areas that support lowland heathland, there should be a presumption in favour of re-establishing heathland on derelict land or land that has been used for mineral extraction. (ACTION: DoE, SO, WO).

Encourage Forest Enterprise and the MoD to agree action plans with specific targets for heathland restoration or management for all heathland sites in their ownership with the statutory nature conservation agencies by the end of 2000. (ACTION: Forest Enterprise, MoD).

Ensure that legislation on public access takes proper account of the nature conservation importance of lowland heathland.

Site safeguard and management

The long term funding of county heathland management projects, most of which have full time project officers and which play a key role in delivering heathland management needs to be addressed.

Consideration should be given to establishing county heathland projects in Wales. (ACTION: EN, CCW).

Relevant local authorities should incorporate heathland Wildlife Site protection policies in development plans by 2000. (ACTION: LAs)

Advisory

Organisations with experience of heathland management should continue to provide advice on how to manage and restore lowland heathland. (ACTION: CCW, EN, LAs, SNH).

Continue existing training courses on heathland management and conservation and target these at land management advisors and officers running countryside management schemes. (ACTION: RSPB)

Produce county lowland heathland re-creation plans identifying areas with a high potential for heathland re-establishment by 2000 for all lowland heathland counties. (ACTION: EN, CCW, SNH)

Seek to disseminate lowland heathland inventories to key organisations involved in heathland management for all counties in England by 1997. Seek to complete the Welsh national survey of lowland heathland so that inventories can be published to guide the targeting of countryside management schemes. Consider the need for a survey and subsequent inventory project in Scotland.

Inventories will need periodic updating (see the requirements of the information sub group). (ACTION: CCW, EN, RSPB, SNH)

International

Continue to develop contacts between international experts in heathland conservation, through mechanisms such as the European Heathland Workshop. This is essential to exchange experience and avoid duplication of effort. (ACTION: CCW, EN, SNH)

The European Environment Agency should be encouraged to develop an inventory of lowland heathland to support EU policy development. (ACTION: DoE)

Research and monitoring

Develop a rapid monitoring method to be used at a sample of sites to ensure that heathland management schemes are meeting their objectives. (ACTION: CCW, EN, SNH)

Seek to ensure that appropriate studies to evaluate new labour saving technologies for heathland restoration especially for techniques such as turf cutting and rotovation are implemented. (ACTION: CCW, DoE, EN, SNH, SO, WO)

Establish a baseline survey for monitoring the extent, condition and restoration of lowland heathland in England. (ACTION: DoE)

Communications and publicity

Undertake a publicity campaign to raise awareness of the importance of lowland heathland by 1998. (ACTION: CCW, EN).

Costing

The successful implementation of the action plan will have resource implications for both the private and public sectors. The data in Table 1 below provide a preliminary estimate of the likely resource costs to the public sector in the years 1997, 2000 and 2010, in addition to existing public expenditure commitments in 1995. Figures are provided for central estimates of costs and also for a range of alternative costs (low and high). These alternative figures reflect different payment (and cost) levels and different scheme coverage assumptions.

The data are based on targets whereby 58,000 hectares of existing heathland habitat will be appropriately maintained and improved and 6,000 hectares of heathland will be re-established through to 2010. This results in a central estimate of about £95 per hectare per year (including existing commitments) required for management and enhancement costs (by 2010). The figures also are based on the assumption that the area of land under management schemes will increase from 48% in 1995 to 92% of private sector land by 2010. The figures also include a public sector land purchase component of 50 hectares each year, and a 50% grant to private sector land purchases of 120 hectares each year, through to 2010.

In order to re-establish 6,000 hectares of lowland heathland additional costs will be as shown in Table 1. This results in an average expenditure of about £300 per hectare established per year (including existing commitments) by 2010, as the proportion of ongoing management relative to new establishment increases.

It should be noted that the above figures will not necessarily be the net cost to the public sector. While significant increases in environmentally based payment schemes would be required to make payments to land managers there could be some savings in terms of reduced agricultural support payments. On the other hand, there may be additional opportunity costs that are excluded from this analysis. An example would be lost timber revenue for public sector landowners such as Forest Enterprise.

Habitat type: Lowland Heathland (£000 per annum)

Total Area to be maintained and enhanced (Ha) 58,000	1997			2000			2010		
	Low	Central	High	Low	Central	High	Low	Central	High
	300	900	1800	500	1700	3600	1800	2600	4700
Area to be re-established (Ha) 6,000	1997			2000			2010		
	Low	Central	High	Low	Central	High	Low	Central	High
	200	200	400	300	400	700	700	800	1200