

Exmoor Landscape Character Assessment

Commissioned by Exmoor National Park Authority

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Enhancing the qualities that make Exmoor special

Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Evolution of the Exmoor Landscape.....	13
3. A : High Coastal Heaths.....	19
4. B : High Wooded Coast, Combes and Cleaves.....	37
5. C : Low Farmed Coast and Marsh.....	53
6. D : Open Moorland.....	61
7. E : Farmed and Settled Vale	79
8. F : Enclosed Farmed Hills with Commons.....	89
9. G : Incised Wooded Valleys.....	101
10.H : Plantation (with Heathland) Hills.....	115
11. I : Wooded and Farmed Hills with Combes.....	123

Appendix 1: Sample Baseline Data Maps

Appendix 2: Moorland Fringe

“For some, Exmoor is the sea and the distant views of Wales. Others believe that Exmoor is its eastern borders – spectacular tree-filled valleys and Dunkery’s purple heather. Others think that Tarr Steps and Winsford Hill are Exmoor. They are all quite right, of course, for Exmoor is all these things – and a thousand others, too.

Exmoor is a summer day at Three Combes’ Foot – the shade of beech tree and the noise of water. Exmoor is a gale out by Chapman Barrows, Exmoor is Dunster in August: crowded pavements, souvenirs – and St. George’s Church with its miraculous screen. Exmoor is ‘Doone Land’ – but it is southern Badgworthy, too, where desolate combes join in the heart of the moor to create that beautiful valley. Exmoor is a stag belling in October mists; it is peat-bog at Exe Head; it is barley in Porlock Vale; Hawkcombe; wild ponies galloping over the moor; deserted iron mines on the Barle; the Knight family tombs at Simonsbath; curlews calling over Wood Barrow; the weird Longstone; cream teas; coach tours; utter loneliness; wild grandeur; postcard prettiness; controversy; heart’s ease.”

S.H Burton (1984).

1. Introduction

Exmoor National Park

- 1.1 Designated in 1954, Exmoor National Park contains some of the finest and most diverse landscapes in Britain.
- 1.2 Covering 692 square kilometres (267 square miles), Exmoor straddles the border of Devon (north) and Somerset (west). The National Park stretches from the outskirts of the North Devon coastal town of Combe Martin (in the west) to the small West Somerset village of Elworthy in the east. To the south, the town of Dulverton forms a gateway to the National Park and in the north the boundary of Exmoor is defined where the coastal cliffs abut the Bristol Channel. The location and geographic context of Exmoor is illustrated in **Figure 1**.
- 1.3 Although relatively small in size, Exmoor exhibits significant variety of landscape scene – dramatic coastal cliffs, windswept open heather and grass moorland, densely wooded river valleys, rolling farmed hills and undulating vale for example. In 1975, S H Burton wrote that *“Nowhere else in Britain can greater variety of scene be found than within the comparatively small territory of the Exmoor National Park”*. It has been noted that *“Exmoor’s uniqueness, Exmoor’s virtue, Exmoor’s peculiar charm, are more subtle and more difficult to identify, except that in her are blended the beauties of all the other national parks (except maybe, the Lake District and Snowdonia), yet with no characteristic to excess”* (Court, 1987)¹. It is, perhaps, the great diversity of the landscape; its constantly changing scene, that forms the very essence of Exmoor’s character.
- 1.4 Exmoor National Park is small in extent and as such is fragile in relation to change – not least small cumulative issues that, collectively, can have a significant impact on the landscape.

¹ Court, Glyn (1987). Exmoor National Park (Countryside Commission Guide). Webb and Bower, Michael Joseph.

Background and Context for the Study

- 1.5 The designation of Exmoor National Park has two statutory purposes:
- **To conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Park; and**
 - **To promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities by the public.**
- 1.6 In the light of the two key purposes, there is a clear need to explore and describe the special qualities that define particular areas or places – to have an explicit understanding of what is special about Exmoor’s landscapes. This will help to ensure that appropriate measures are taken forward for successful landscape policy and management to both safeguard a landscape (that includes some of the wildest and remote upland areas in southern England) as well as ensuring continued public involvement and intervention within it.
- 1.7 This report has been written with a broad audience in mind – aimed for example at Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) staff and Members, professional consultants working within Exmoor National Park, landowners, land managers, Landscape Architects, Land Agents, Architects, Planners, Local Authorities (crossing and bordering the National Park), Government Agencies, Environmental Trusts, charities and pressure groups, academics and students as well as interested members of the public.

Landscape Studies

- 1.8 This landscape character assessment has been undertaken as part of a series of landscape-focussed studies for Exmoor National Park Authority and The Exmoor Society.
- 1.9 In 2004 the Exmoor Society appointed Land Use Consultants (LUC) to undertake an evaluation of the current state of Exmoor’ moorlands – the ‘Moorlands at a Crossroads’ study. During the study’s development, it became apparent that there was a need for Exmoor National Park to have an up-to-date Landscape

Character Assessment. This would help underpin and inform a whole host of landscape planning, management and design policies and strategies for the future. As a result, Exmoor National Park Authority commissioned LUC to undertake a Landscape Character Assessment (2004). This was a short, fairly rapid study with the purpose of identifying and mapping boundaries of the different Landscape Character Types (accurate to 1: 25, 000) and providing a list of the key characteristics or component features and elements making up the different landscapes. The study also provided Indicative Landscape Character Areas with the intention that these be taken forward by Exmoor National Park Authority (for more detailed study) to refine and amend boundaries as appropriate.

1.10 Following the development of the Exmoor Landscape Working Group and the Moorland Initiative², ENPA decided that the Landscape Character Assessment undertaken by Land Use Consultants should be built upon with the purpose of developing detailed descriptions as well as landscape evaluations. This study is a result of the decision to expand the landscape character work in the National Park in order to:

- **Provide an important landscape framework that will pro-actively inform the development of a number of key policy areas and provide the basis for strategic planning;**
- **Enable better-informed decisions to be made on the future management of the landscape by informing the re-drafting of the National Park Management Plan;**
- **Assist the drafting of the Local Development Framework Core Strategy;**
- **Improve the understanding of the landscape resource available on Exmoor;**
- **Inform the revision of the Exmoor National Park Design Guide; and**

² The Moorland Initiative is the umbrella term for a very wide range of projects, initiatives and actions focussed at safeguarding the future of Exmoor's Moorlands.

- **Provide the evidence base for developing landscape management guidance e.g. horse-related development.**

1.11 There are many other potential uses for the report including for example the development of landscape sensitivity and capacity studies. Such studies fall beyond the remit and resources available for this study but the descriptive material contained within this report will provide essential baseline information that can be taken forward for a range of studies/purposes in the future.

Landscape Character Assessment

- 1.12 Landscape Character Assessment is a well-established tool for systematically, identifying, classifying and describing the landscape – recognising it as a continuous system that does not adhere to administrative boundaries. By identifying, features and elements of the landscape (and their combination and expression), the essence or special character of a particular place can be revealed, explored and understood.
- 1.13 Since the 1980s Landscape Character Assessment has increasingly been used to understand the landscape around us and to apply that understanding to suit a range of different purposes e.g. as a planning tool (policy and development control) and as a basis for the development of landscape management strategies or for landscape sensitivity and capacity studies for example.
- 1.14 Landscape Character Assessment can broadly be split into two main stages:
- **Characterisation** – an objective and relatively value-free process of landscape identification, mapping, classification and description; and
 - **Making Judgements** – developing and employing a robust methodology in order that professional judgements about the landscape can be made and which will then assist with decision-making.

- 1.15 Criteria used within an evaluation of the landscape are likely to have elements of subjectivity within them but the development of objective descriptions followed by a systematic process of evaluation helps to reduce subjectivity. Landscape Character Assessment– Guidance for England and Scotland (2002)³ states that *“the process of characterisation should be an objective process in the main, while making judgements to inform decisions involves an element of subjectivity which can be clarified by using criteria agreed beforehand”*.
- 1.16 Landscape Character Assessment is now deeply embedded within the planning system – from the national to the local scale there exists a wide range of policies, statements and guidance documents that aim to conserve, protect, enhance and positively manage the character of the landscape. In 2006, the UK signed up to the European Council's European Landscape Convention – the first international convention for dealing directly with landscapes in terms of their protection, their development and sustainable management. The European Landscape Convention and the increased reference to landscape character within planning policy and guidance are clear indicators that landscape and landscape issues are rapidly moving up the political and environmental agenda.

Assessment Methodology

- 1.17 This study follows the current, accepted method of Landscape Character Assessment as set out in Landscape Character Assessment – Guidance for England and Scotland (2002). It has been prepared within the National framework provided by the Countryside Agency and English Nature's 'Joint Character Areas' and the Countryside Agency's 'National Landscape Typology' (**Figures 2 and 3**).
- 1.18 There have been three key stages to conducting the study – desk study, field survey and production of the report.

³ Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage

Desk Study

- 1.19 Using the existing LUC Landscape Character Assessment as a baseline, along with a range of baseline data (including geology, soils, historic landscape assessment, hydrology and topography) the existing landscape type and indicative character area boundaries were reviewed and refined and Draft Landscape Character Areas were mapped for field survey purposes.
- 1.20 The Exmoor National Park Authority's Geographical Information System and digital aerial photography were used throughout the study as a source of baseline data and for the production of maps for report production. Examples of baseline data maps are provided in **Appendix 1 (Figures 5, 6 and 7)**.

Table 1. Landscape Character Types and Character Areas

Landscape Character Types are generic in nature, sharing broadly similar patterns and combinations of elements (physical as well as human) such as geology, soils, vegetation, settlement and field pattern in every area where they occur e.g. *Incised Wooded Valley* or *Open Moorland*.

Landscape Character Areas are the unique, individual geographic areas that represent/exhibit the characteristics of a particular landscape type. So, within Exmoor, two separate Character Areas belonging to the *Incised Wooded Valleys* Landscape Type are the '**Exe** *Incised Wooded Valley*' and the '**Avill** *Incised Wooded Valley*'.

Field Survey

- 1.21 The field survey was undertaken using maps at 1:25,000. As well as a process for gathering more detailed information to inform the descriptions of landscape character, the field survey was geared towards gathering information on Key Issues or Visible Forces for Change to inform the Landscape Evaluation. Field survey allows perceptual and sensory elements of the landscape to be recorded – characteristics that cannot be measured through desk study alone. Degrees of remoteness and tranquillity were considered, based on the initial

Land Use Consultants field survey that used the following criteria:

- **Visual and aural influences** e.g. distance from settlement, modern communication and degree of accessibility;
- **Presence of construction or artefacts** e.g. contemporary built/engineered works.
- **Evidence of contemporary land uses** e.g. intensive farming, overgrazing, off road vehicle use.
- **Landform and degree of exposure** e.g. physical composition of the landscape and component factors which can engender different degrees of remoteness and tranquillity.
- **Extent of the landscape** e.g. covering sufficient area and providing a physical challenge to engender a sense of remoteness.

Classification, Description and Evaluation

- 1.22 Following on from the desk study and field survey, the map of landscape types and character areas was produced and digitised, descriptions and evaluations of landscape character developed and reported.

Study Evaluation

- 1.23 For each landscape type, the aim of the evaluation was to provide,:
- **An overall guiding landscape strategy** - to provide a basis for strategic landscape planning and management (as well as informing Local Development Framework policy and development control decisions); and
 - **A set of accompanying Landscape Guidelines** to suggest recommendations for managing future change, in line with the overall aim of the landscape strategy.
- 1.24 There is currently no one accepted methodology for evaluating landscape character. This evaluation has been based on an understanding of **Landscape Quality** – determined from an assessment of **Strength of Character** and

Landscape Condition. The evaluation has been based on professional judgement. It has not, at this stage, involved the views of stakeholders or been open to wider public consultation.

Table 2. Landscape Quality, Strength of Character and Condition

Landscape Quality. This is a judgement about the overall physical state of the landscape and is based upon the combination of the strength of landscape character and overall landscape condition (see below).

Strength of Character: an assessment of how the combination of landscape components (features, elements and characteristics) creates a distinctive sense of place. The process considers how distinctive and recognisable the pattern of elements is that make up a particular type of landscape; taking into account attractors and detractors in the landscape e.g. consistent use of local building materials and vernacular detailing or intrusive communication masts. It is also mindful of landscapes that may be empty of distinctive (positive) landscape features such that it is lacking character and local distinctiveness. It also considers expression or articulation of features and degree of fragmentation e.g. an historic pattern of hedgerow enclosure may have fallen into decline such that the landscape pattern is diluted and the strength of character weakened as a result. A three-point scale has been used for the purpose of making judgements – *weak, moderate* and *strong*.

Landscape Condition: judgements made by consideration of condition or intactness of landscape features, elements and characteristics within the landscape and how these combine to inform an impression of overall landscape condition. Again, a three point, scale has been used for the purpose of making judgements – *poor, moderate* and *good*.

1.25 Matrices are frequently used to help guide decision-making within landscape assessment work. To assist with making judgements of the Quality of Exmoor's

landscapes, the matrix below has been used. Linked to every judgement of landscape quality is an associated Landscape Strategy that can be used to guide landscape policy development and management on the ground – to conserve, enhance, restore or even create character.

Table 3. Landscape Quality and Associated Landscape Strategy

Landscape Condition	Good	Moderate <i>Enhance</i>	Moderate – Good <i>Conserve and Enhance</i>	Good <i>Conserve</i>
	Moderate	Poor – Moderate <i>Enhance and Restore</i>	Moderate <i>Enhance</i>	Moderate – Good <i>Conserve and Enhance</i>
	Poor	Poor <i>Restore/Create</i>	Poor – Moderate <i>Enhance and Restore</i>	Moderate <i>Enhance</i>
		Weak	Moderate	Strong
		Strength of Landscape Character		

Landscape Strategies

Conserve: where the landscape quality is good (due to good condition and strong character) and there should be an emphasis on protecting or safeguarding the key features and characteristics of the landscape as they are.

Enhance: emphasis should be to improve features that have fallen into decline. This may include improvements to landscape management practices and the introduction/removal of elements or features in order to strengthen character and/or improve perceived condition.

Restore: emphasis should be on repairing or re-establishing features that have been lost or are in a state of severe decline.

Create: where the landscape quality is poor (due to poor condition and weak character) and there is a need to form a new and different landscape for the benefit of people and the environment.

Key Issues and Landscape Guidance

- 1.26 A list of **Key Issues** or visible forces for change has been identified for each landscape type. Where changes are unique to a particular Character Area, these are also noted. The purpose of identifying Key Issues is to recognise negative changes in the landscape (affecting both the landscape resource and visual amenity) and to develop a series of **Objectives** (based on those changes) for each landscape type. The aim is that these objectives work towards achieving the overall **Landscape Strategy** outlined for each landscape type.

Landscape Character Types and Character Areas of Exmoor

- 1.27 The process of landscape characterisation has identified 9 separate Landscape Types and 26 Character Areas. These are outlined below and illustrated in **Figure 4**.

Table 4. Landscape Character Types and Character Areas

Type A:	High Coastal Heaths
A1:	Holdstone Down and Trentishoe
A2:	Valley of Rocks
A3:	The Foreland
A4:	North Hill
Type B:	High Wooded Coast, Combes and Cleaves
B1:	Heddon's Mouth
B2:	Woody Bay
B3:	Lyn

B4: Culbone – Horner

B5: Bossington

B6: Culver Cliff

Type C: Low Farmed Coast and Marsh

C1: Porlock

Type D: Open Moorland

D1: Northern

D2: Southern

D3: Winsford Hill

D4: Haddon Hill

Type E: Farmed and Settled Vale

E1: Porlock – Dunster – Minehead

Type F: Enclosed Farmed Hills with Commons

F1: Northern

F2: Southern

Type G: Incised Wooded Valleys

G1: Bray

G2: Mole

G3: Barle

G4: Exe

G5: Haddeo

G6: Avill

Type H: Plantation (with heathland) Hills

H1: Croydon and Grabbist

Type I: Wooded and Farmed Hills with Combes

I1: The Brendons

Moorland Fringe

- 1.28 In addition to the landscape character assessment, a further (secondary) part of the study brief was to consider and map areas of Moorland Fringe. Text and a map related to this additional piece of work can be found in **Appendix 2**.