

Moorlands at a Crossroads

The State of the Moorlands of Exmoor, 2004

Summary Report



**A study for the Exmoor Society by Land Use Consultants
October 2004**

FOREWORD

Land Use Consultants' independent and authoritative report is welcomed because it provides a new integrating approach in assessing the importance and condition of the moorlands that is more suitable for the twenty first century. It contains several key messages that need to be highlighted and comprehended if the appropriate action is to be taken.

The report reveals that the moorlands are of much greater value to society than was previously understood. They provide a wide range of public and private benefits in terms of their landscape, historic and cultural environment, wildlife and natural resources, recreational use and farming practices.

The second message is that after fifty years of designation, thirty years of moorland debate and ten years of ESA management there should be wider recognition of the moorlands' special qualities and, crucially, more favourable management of them. There is a lack of agreement on the objectives and on the best way of achieving them. The concept of condition or "fit for purpose" is not understood and the evidence for assessing it is not readily available.

The third message underlines the better known fact that public policies do not always pull in the same direction and can be in conflict with each other. A narrow focus on one aspect such as SSSI condition can lead to negative impacts on other interests such as archaeology. Policy measures decided at a national level by different agencies can become dysfunctional on the ground because they are not fine tuned or integrated. The different moorland areas need more subtle management approaches as the Condition Audit in the report shows.

The fourth message is related: there has been little debate either nationally or locally on the bigger picture and little attempt to look at all the conservation interests so that there is little "joined up thinking" or integration of policies and management. Exmoor is desperate for such an approach. There are difficult challenges here for DEFRA's new integrated agency and its relationship with the Exmoor National Park Authority.

It is over agricultural management that there is most disagreement. On the one hand the biological monitoring of SSSIs has led to a controlled regime of grazing and burning, and on the other farmers are saying that these regimes are not practical or effective in the long term. The report suggests that it should be possible to come to some understanding and agreement on this issue. The skills and knowledge of moorland farmers honed through generations of managing the land are crucial to the future of the moorlands.

The sixth message recognises that Exmoor, like many rural areas, is moving into uncharted waters with changes to CAP. There is a real danger of economic disconnection of the moorlands from farming systems under free market conditions. Public policy will need to address this through the important economic and social role of LFA support. The transition from the ESA model to the higher level environmental stewardship scheme provides the opportunity to address new trends, such as withdrawal of grazing and scrub encroachment, and to include other desirable conservation outcomes such as landscape enhancement as well.

The seventh aspect identified is surprise over the neglect of the changing nature and condition of the landscape. There have been significant advances in national thinking and methodology on landscape characterisation and capacity that Exmoor needs to adopt.

Overall LUC's powerful report shows that although much is being done that is laudable, it is piecemeal and haphazard, and there needs to be a change in both pace and direction if the moorlands are not to remain at risk. Exmoor may be once again at the cutting edge of the national debate about the moorlands and their significance to National Park purposes. The challenge to all of us is to ensure that their contribution to sustainable development is fully realised.



The Parish Rooms,
Dulverton TA22 9DP

Rachel Thomas CBE
Chairman, Exmoor Society

Introduction

It is fifty years since Exmoor National Park was designated in recognition of the outstanding beauty, wildness and tranquillity of the moorlands which dominate its landscape. Throughout this period the condition and future of Exmoor's moorlands have been the subject of heated debate. The Exmoor Society's pamphlet "*Can Exmoor Survive?*"¹, published in 1966, was critical in drawing attention to the escalating losses of moorland to agricultural reclamation and improvement. Ten years later, Government commissioned Lord Porchester to report on the extent of these changes and the options open to the public authorities to address them². His recommendations on the use of voluntary management agreements have formed the basis for agri-environment policy across the UK.

However, it is now nearly forty years since Sinclair's report and over twenty years since Lord Porchester's. Public understanding and expectations of the moorlands, Government policies, and the commercial factors driving management by farmers are now very different and are changing fast. Perhaps the single most important change facing the moorlands is the recently agreed reform of the Common Agricultural Policy which, at a stroke, is likely to reverse the pressures of agricultural management. Other current or impending changes include the mapping of open access land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act and the replacement of the Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme with a new Environmental Stewardship Scheme.

This study was commissioned to provide an independent and authoritative evaluation of the current state of the moorlands and the pressures facing it in coming years. It has a particular focus of informing the National Park Authority's (NPA) review of the moorlands during the Park's 50th year. The purposes of this study can be summarised as to:

- undertake an independent evaluation of the state of Exmoor's moorlands; and
- guide the Society's work in promoting the conservation and enjoyment of Exmoor

A new methodology to assess the state of the special qualities of the moorlands

In order to consider the diversity of public benefits and special qualities provided by the moorlands as a whole, this study has developed a new integrating way of assessing the state of the moorlands. The study has identified a range of 'special qualities', based upon the statutory purposes of National Parks, that include the:

- natural resources of geology, soils and water;
- landscape character and aesthetic qualities;
- archaeological and cultural heritage;
- biodiversity;
- recreation and enjoyment; and
- agricultural management

For each of these special qualities, the study has described the value and significance of the moorlands, identifying where the moorlands are of international, national, regional and local significance.

The study has then assessed the condition of the moorlands against each of these special qualities, judging their 'fitness for purpose'. The causes of unfavourable condition and the drivers of future change have been identified and, from these, have arisen two contrasting scenarios that suggest how the moorlands could develop in coming years. The study concludes with suggestions for actions that will be necessary to deliver a sustainable future for the moorlands that best conserves their special qualities.

The current extent of the moorlands

The study has used a combination of the NPA's 'Section 3' conservation map of moor and heath and Defra's moorland line as the definition for moorland, giving a total area of 18,332 ha. There is a strong coincidence between this area and the provisional open access map for Exmoor produced by the Countryside Agency.

The categorisation of the moorlands into five different areas of the Coastal Heaths, Northern Heather Moors, Grass Moors of the Centre, Southern Heather Moors and Brendon Heaths by Geoffrey Sinclair in 1966 is still relevant today. This study has further subdivided the moorlands into 22 units based on their vegetation cover, ownership and management.

The majority of the moorland is owned by a relatively small number of owners, of which the NPA, the National Trust and Badgworthy Land Company are the largest. There are 19 registered commons on the moorlands, covering a total of 4,811 ha (a little over a quarter of the total moorland area). Day to day management of the land is in the hands of a larger number of smaller landowners, farming tenants and commoners. While there are nearly 800 registered agricultural holdings on Exmoor and around 123 registered commoners, the number of farming businesses actively involved in grazing the moorlands is thought to be around 85. The day to day management and stewardship of the moorlands is therefore in the hands of a relatively small number of landowners and farmers.

The moorlands are covered by a range of national and international designations that recognise, and seek to conserve and enhance, their public importance. These designations are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of key statutory designations on the moorlands

Designation	Total area / no.	Responsible body
Exmoor National Park	69,280 ha	ENPA
Moorland line (all within the Severely Disadvantaged Area)	17,234 ha	Defra
Sites of Special Scientific Interest	16,638 ha	English Nature
Exmoor Heaths candidate Special Area of Conservation	10,705 ha	English Nature
Scheduled Ancient Monuments	132 sites	English Heritage
Exmoor Environmentally Sensitive Area	80,615 ha	Defra
Exmoor Heritage Coast	64.14 km	ENPA

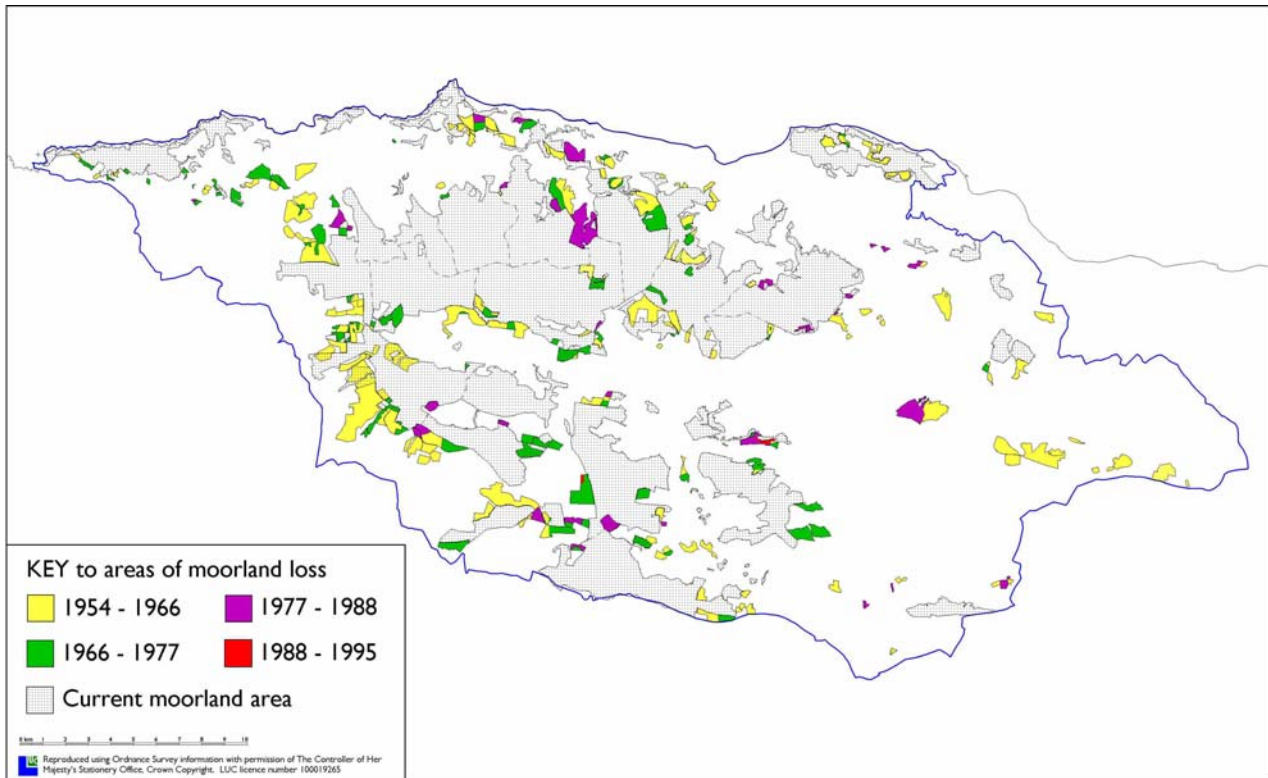
Recent history of the moorlands

The history of the moorlands has been a complex one of reclamation for agriculture and, to a lesser extent, forestry, with some areas reverting to moorland vegetation and management. The period until the mid 1960s saw the moorlands subject to increasingly intensive agricultural management and reclamation and, in certain areas such as the Brendon Heaths, to afforestation. Increasing concern about the impact that these changes were having on the landscape of Exmoor started to emerge with the designation of the National Park and culminated in the Porchester Enquiry in 1977. The far-reaching recommendations of Lord Porchester's report lead to the active protection of moorland through management agreements between the NPA and landowners. The designation of the ESA in 1993 saw a dramatic increase in the area of moorland under management agreements, and the large majority of the moorlands are now covered by ESA agreements. There is now growing evidence of a new trend in the history of the moorlands in which agricultural management is declining to the extent that the character of the moorlands is changing again. This change is more subtle than that which has occurred in the last 60 years and involves a gradual shift of character rather than outright destruction of moorland vegetation.

Figures on the conversion of moorland to enclosed farmland and forestry show that the rate of loss has declined significantly since the 1960s to the current situation where the moorland area

has been relatively stable since the mid 1980s. The greatest relative loss of moorland took place on the Brendon Heaths (38% between 1947 and 1976), followed by the Coastal Heaths (21%), the Southern Heather Moors (18%), the Northern Heather Moors (14%) and finally the Grass Moors of the Centre Moors (10%). The areas of moorland lost between 1954 and 1995 are shown in Figure 1³

Figure 1. Areas of moorland lost between 1954 and 1995



The value and significance of the moorlands

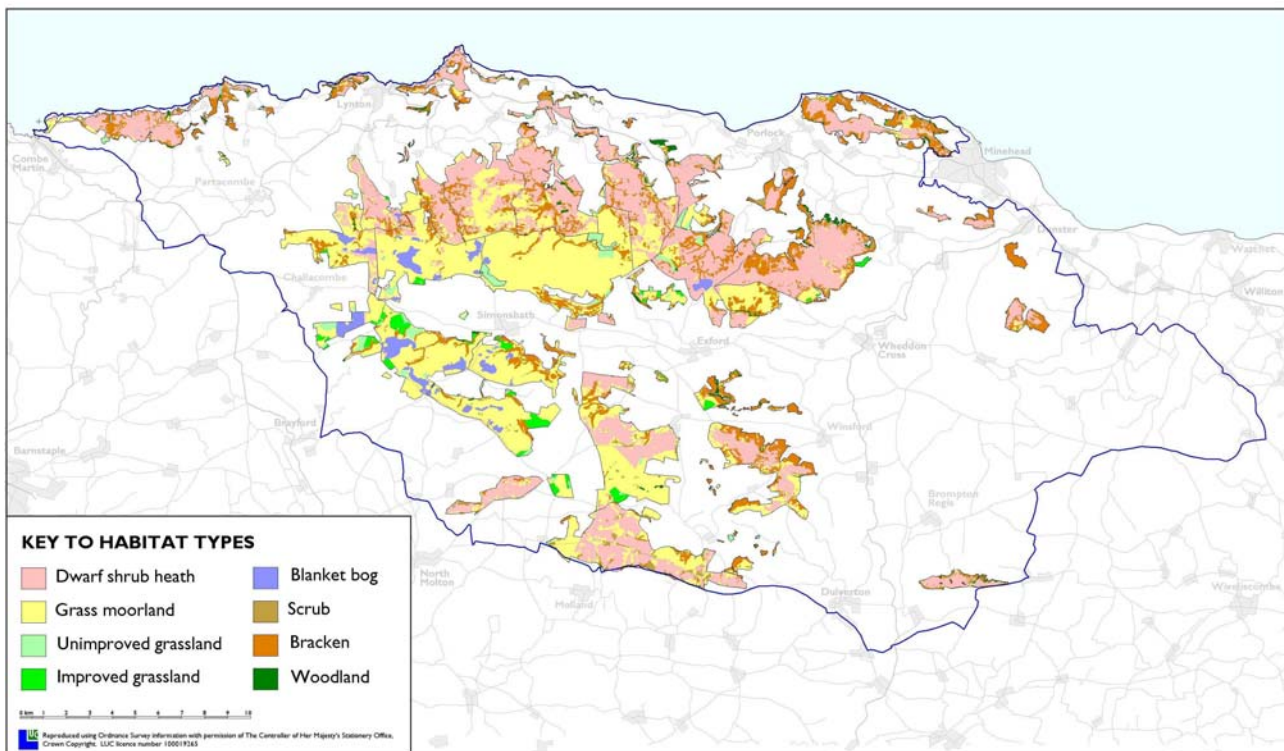
The whole of Exmoor has **international significance** through its National Park status, as a protected landscape of equal standing to the UK's other National Parks. At this international level, the UK's National Parks are considered important because they represent living landscapes shaped by land management traditions and communities and contain a richness of semi-natural habitats, all of which are valued in their own right. The perceptions that people have of the remoteness and wildness of the moorlands, which they value highly, are heavily influenced by their understanding of the cultural history of Exmoor. This cultural history is also internationally known through literature and poetry, such as the works of RD Blackmoor and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The moorlands also have international significance in terms of the upland and coastal heath and blanket bog habitats, and the biodiversity they support. This is recognised through the designation of the majority of the moorlands as a Special Area of Conservation under the EU Habitats Directive. While the moorlands have relatively few species that are rare at an international or national level, it is the position of the upland heath and blanket bog habitats at the south westerly edge of their European distribution, and the natural transitions between the upland heath, coastal heath and woodland, that are of greatest significance (see Figure 2).

The moorlands contain a rich and complex record of past environments and human activity, which, as a whole, is of **national significance**. The significance of the archaeology is due to the high state of preservation of most sites and the functional complexity of the whole assemblage (with evidence of prehistoric landscapes interwoven with mediaeval farming systems, nineteen

century enclosures and twentieth century activity). Knowledge of the moorlands' archaeology is still developing and the national, and possibly international, significance of the small prehistoric stone settings that are a particular feature of Exmoor is only now emerging.

Figure 2. Distribution of broad habitat types



The recreational use of Exmoor as a whole is of **national significance**, drawing people from throughout the UK over an increasingly long season, with a proportion of visitors coming from overseas. While the total number of visitors may be low compared to other National Parks (but the most recent data is now over ten years old), tourism plays a vital part in the area's economy. The relatively low levels of recreational use contribute to the feelings of remoteness and tranquillity that enhance the experience of visitors. Although the moorlands are used by many different groups of people, these uses are separated spatially, reducing their impacts. Also of national significance are the two indigenous livestock breeds found on the moorlands, the Exmoor pony (which probably has international importance because of its genetic closeness to the now extinct wild North Atlantic pony, although this is not widely known) and the Exmoor Horn sheep.

The moorlands are of **sub-regional significance** as the headwaters of several large rivers. The peat soils, found predominantly under the grass moorland and blanket bog of the Exmoor Forest, can also be considered of sub-regional importance, both through their moderating influence on river flows, their preserved record of past environments and, potentially, their role as a sink for storing atmospheric carbon that would otherwise contribute to global climate change.

The significance of farming on the moorlands is difficult to assign to a simple geographical scale. While moorland farming is only of local importance in terms of its economic and social impacts, its significance is far greater than this would imply. The grazing and burning of the moorlands, undertaken by the relatively small number of moorland farmers, is critical to the maintenance of almost all the other special qualities. Over the last 50 years, the major threats to the special qualities have tended to come from agricultural reclamation and improvement of the moorlands. However, without continued grazing by livestock, managed by farmers who understand the moorland environment and are sensitive to its needs, it is likely that the significance of the other special qualities would decline.

Evidence on the condition of the moorlands

This section examines available evidence on the condition of the moorlands in relation to their special qualities. It assesses the moorlands 'fitness for purpose' and, by implication, the success of the current management policies being pursued by private landowners and public bodies.

Whereas the assessment of value and significance was able to draw on a wealth of previous published information, there was less information available on the condition of the moorlands. The study has therefore drawn mainly on the views and experience provided by consultees.

Given the range of designations and initiatives that have operated on Exmoor over the last 50 years, one might have expected that these would have produced widespread recognition and understanding of the area's special qualities and would have led to their favourable management. However, this study shows that this is far from the case – in many areas there is evidence of a lack of consensus between the major stakeholders over the desirable end state of the moorlands, and of the best way of achieving this. In some instances, it would appear that the quality of the moorlands is continuing to deteriorate. For instance, English Nature's assessment of the condition of the SSSIs shows that nearly 40% of the area is in unfavourable condition for biodiversity, including 7% that is continuing to decline further.

The message is not all bad. There is widespread agreement that most recreational uses of the moorlands are sustainable, and even that recreational use could rise as a result of the provision of open access under the CRoW Act without impacting on the moorlands' special qualities. Concerns about the scenic beauty and aesthetic qualities of the moorlands are relatively minor, and it is clear that the landscape qualities that led to the designation of the Park in 1954 are still cherished and valued by residents and visitors alike. However, in this respect, it is surprising that little attention has been paid to assessing the quality and condition of the moorlands' changing landscape character since the work done by the NPA immediately after the Porchester Report 20 years ago.

It is on the topic of the agricultural management of the moorlands that there is most disagreement. Although the outright conflict of the late 1970s and early 1980s is fortunately long past, there remains a gulf of understanding between moorland farmers and the different groups representing conservation interests over what the optimal condition of the moorlands vegetation cover should be and how best to provide this. On the one hand, English Nature has highlighted the poor biological condition of large areas of the moorlands. On the other hand, many farmers complain that the grazing and burning regimes they are being encouraged to adopt to improve this condition are not practical in agricultural management terms and will not ultimately be effective.

Concern has also been expressed that management to enhance the landscape and biodiversity, such as mechanical cutting of bracken or preparation of grass moorland to reintroduce heather, could damage hidden archaeology. Finally, the impact of some of the proposed management activities on the wider scenic and aesthetic qualities of the moorlands, and the opportunities for enhancing these qualities, do not seem to have been considered.

This is not to say that Exmoor should be singled out as a particularly bad example amongst other National Parks in England and Wales. The conditions of Exmoor's moorlands are either typical of equivalent areas in other Parks or, in key areas such as the quality of recreational use, appear to be in better condition. Indeed what is most interesting is that Exmoor seems to be leading national trends in terms of the changes to agricultural management, providing an indication of the issues that are likely to affect other areas in a few years time.

Current policy objectives and drivers of future change

This section turns to the future of the moorlands. It looks at where public policies are taking the moorlands in terms of the objectives they are pursuing, and it looks further forward at the pressures that are likely to drive future change.

Support for hill farming: Government is committed to continuing its support for UK agriculture but expects farming to become more 'market facing' rather than 'subsidy driven', to become more environmentally sustainable and to diversify incomes away from primary agriculture.

The fundamental reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) that will be introduced in 2005 and subsequent years will have major impacts on the profitability and management practices of farming on the moorlands. Work by the NPA suggests that moorland farms will face a fall of at least 37% in their income from the main CAP commodity schemes (not including the ESA) between 2003 and 2012. Given that these payments make up a high proportion of moorland farmers' total income, such a sharp fall is likely to cause many of these businesses to restructure, with most probably opting to cut their costs and farm over a larger area. There is a widespread consensus that the decoupling of direct subsidies and increased exposure to cheaper world markets means that keeping cattle on the moorlands is unlikely to be profitable.

Government's main policy instrument for supporting farming in the Less Favoured Areas (LFA) is the Hill Farm Allowance (HFA), an area payment that replaced the headage-based Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance in 2001. A review of the HFA in 2003 concluded that the scheme should continue in its current form until it is scheduled to end in 2006. Thereafter, a more fundamental review of support for the LFAs will take place in the light of the new Rural Development Regulation 2007 and 2013. The European Commission's proposals for this regulation, published in July 2004, suggest that support for farmers in "mountain areas and in areas with handicaps" should continue, but that the boundaries of the Less Favoured Areas should be reviewed based on new physical (soils and climate) criteria.



Agri-environment schemes: The main policy instrument for encouraging sustainable management of the moorlands has been the Exmoor Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) Scheme and the large majority of the moorlands are now under ESA management agreements. From 2005, a single Environmental Stewardship Scheme will replace all the current agri-environment schemes although it is understood that existing agreements under these schemes will continue to run. On Exmoor, it is likely that most areas of moorland will be eligible for funding under the Higher Level of the new scheme, although funding will be issued on a more targeted and competitive basis than is currently the case. It is likely that the moorland management plans developed under the ESA will be the basis for agreements under the new scheme. If Defra decide to terminate existing ESA agreements at the five year break, the first major transition of moorland to the new scheme will be in 2008.

Action to improve the condition of the SSSIs: Defra's Public Service Agreement (PSA) places an obligation on the Department and its agencies, lead by English Nature to bring 95% of SSSIs into favourable or recovering condition by 2010. As stated above, assessments by English Nature suggest that progress towards this target is slow. English Nature is engaged on a site-by-site review of the conservation objectives they have for all SSSIs, a process that is likely to continue until 2005/06. This review is examining whether the current end state (habitat type) that is being

sought is appropriate. On Exmoor, this review is particularly relevant to the grass moorlands where a decision will need to be taken whether a return to upland heath, wet heath or blanket bog from the purple moorgrass dominated swards is realistic.

It should be noted that the focus of the PSA target for SSSIs is narrowly focussed on biological (and in the case of the earth science sites, geological) condition and takes no account of other qualities such as scenic landscape quality or archaeological needs. It remains to be seen whether this will change with the introduction of the new 'integrated agency'.

The right of open access: The introduction of open access on foot to the moorlands under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act will take place in August 2005. The large majority of the moorlands already have open access; *de facto* access that is accepted by the landowner; or are well served by public rights of way. The practical impact of the CRoW Act is therefore not expected to be great. However, the legislation is providing an impetus to the County Councils and NPA to re-assess the network of rights of way onto the moorlands and the signage and interpretation on the moorlands. There is strong agreement that signage on the moorlands themselves should be kept to a minimum to preserve their remote and wild character.



Legislation to ban hunting with hounds: At the time of writing, it seems likely that Parliament will ban hunting with hounds. The economic and other impacts on Exmoor of a ban are outside the scope of this report and have been covered in other studies for the NPA and local authorities. Evidence from this study suggests that recreational use during winter will be reduced significantly in the remoter parts of the Northern Heather Moors and the Southern Heather Moors, and the contribution that hunting has made to the cultural identity of the moorlands will become part of their history rather than a living culture.

Legislation on common land management: Defra has made a commitment to introduce legislation to facilitate more effective management of common land, while maintaining its protection. Although nearly a quarter of the moorlands are registered as common land, on most commons there is now only a handful of active commoners and only Brendon Common has an active commoners association. A key test of the legislation's effectiveness will be the ease with which the owners of common land where there are no active commoners can introduce sustainable management without undermining the future rights of registered commoners.

Climate change: Latest research suggests that changes in the climate of England over the next 50 years will lead to a rise of up to 3°C in temperature, up to 20% increase in winter rainfall, up to 30% decrease in summer rainfall and generally more extreme weather patterns. Natural habitats and species may be put under severe pressure, especially those on the edge of their natural range or that depend on regular rainfall – conditions which apply on the moorlands. Blanket bog, which is already one of the most sensitive and threatened habitats on Exmoor, is likely to be put under particular pressure. Species which are on the southern edge of their range such as the merlin or the rare plant, lesser twayblade, are likely to diminish, while species on the northern edge of their range, such as the Dartford warbler, may benefit.

Changing recreational demands: The changing nature of recreation in Britain is a major topic that is outside the scope of this report. However, it is likely that Exmoor will see growing demand for short break holidays, particularly outside the main holiday season. Retired people, usually travelling as couples or small groups, will make up a large proportion of staying visitors. The recent increase in competitive and adventure events on Exmoor is likely to continue and

there is likely to be a general increase in the more active forms of recreation that the moorlands are well placed to provide (such as longer distance walking). It seems likely that the number of regular local walkers (often exercising their dogs) will remain more static.

Demand for moorland bred livestock: The detachment of the moorlands from the wider farming economy that has taken place in recent years is partly due to market demands for higher quality, earlier finished beef cattle and lambs. These trends are likely to continue, with farm assurance schemes applying higher standards of animal husbandry that will make grazing of the moorlands less integral to mainstream livestock production. However, there is a small but growing demand for high value branded livestock products that are linked with particular localities and can demonstrate environmental benefits. While the opportunities for moorland farmers to supply these markets are not yet clear, this represents an important opportunity that deserves exploration.

Demographic change and declining moorland management skills: The rate of succession to family farms is declining and, although there are an increasing number of small non-commercial farms, agricultural management of the majority of the Park is becoming concentrated in fewer hands. This is especially the case on the moorlands where the number of active farmers, and thus the 'critical mass' of man power (to undertake activities such as stock clearance and burning) and the reservoir of moorland management knowledge, is already low. However, evidence from a study by the University of Exeter⁴ suggests that moorland farmers are more positive in their assessment of the current state of their businesses and more confident for the future, than their non-moorland colleagues. Information from this study suggests that an immediate crisis in succession to moorland farms is unlikely.

Scenarios for the future of the moorlands

As stated earlier, there is growing agreement between the groups that have often found themselves on the opposite side of arguments over the last 50 years over issues such as the special aesthetic and landscape qualities of the moorlands and the sustainable levels of recreational use. However, it is equally clear that, while there has been much detailed work on particular management issues such as the recovery of heather or co-ordination of burning programmes, there has been remarkably little discussion between the different groups about the 'big picture' of where public policy and private activity should be taking the moorlands.

In an attempt to stimulate debate about the kind of moorlands that people with an interest in their future wish to see encouraged, the main report puts forward two alternative outcomes for the moorlands, based on current trends and the drivers of future change. These paint polarised pictures of the possible future of the moorlands in which two quite different sets of underlying drivers of change operate.

- The first scenario assumes that pressures for the withdrawal of grazing, a resulting decline in recreational use and a lack public interest in the moorlands converge. This scenario explores the consequences of partial abandonment of the moorlands.
- The second scenario assumes that increasing public demand for the qualities and products of the moorland leads to a resurgence of interest and investment. This scenario explores the potential for the moorlands to expand, both in terms of their public profile and their physical extent.

These two scenarios are not intended to be mutually exclusive for Exmoor as a whole – indeed it is likely that some areas of moorland may follow one scenario while others will follow the other.

Actions to secure a sustainable future for the moorlands

The report concludes by suggesting the actions that will be necessary to strengthen the outstanding special qualities of the moorlands and secure them for the future.

Actions to create a consensus on future objectives

One of the key overall findings of this study is that, despite the range of statutory designations and initiatives that have focussed on the moorlands for the last 50 years, there is a lack of consensus between the different interests on what the future objectives of managing the moorlands should be. The following actions are proposed as necessary to create this strong consensus on future objectives.

1. A re-invigorated Moorland Forum: It is suggested that a rejuvenated, responsive and representative Moorland Forum should be the main arena for discussion on the future management objectives of the moorlands, including the targeting and performance of the Environmental Stewardship Scheme and the condition of the SSSIs on the moorlands. The NPA should continue to provide administrative support and membership should be enlarged to encompass landscape, archaeological, tourism and recreation interests.

2. Pro-active engagement by moorland farmers: It is important that farmers are involved at the start of initiatives and that their experience and concerns are taken account of. However, this requires that farmers are willing to adopt a positive role in helping to deliver public benefit rather than, as has occurred in the past, reacting negatively to what they see as unwelcome change imposed on them. It is suggested that the National Farmers Union takes responsibility for co-ordinating a paper, drawing on the findings of this report, which will describe an agreed vision and objectives that moorland farmers have for the future of the moorlands.

3. Foster appreciation of the overall value of the moorlands:

This study has found that the search for solutions to specific practical problems on the moorlands has meant that the overall significance of the moorlands has often been lost in the detail. Firstly, it is important that Defra's new Integrated Agency adopts an organisational structure at a regional and local level that allows a new level of integrated thinking. Secondly, it is suggested that the Exmoor Society, as the charitable body dedicated to the conservation and protection of the National Park, should keep a watchful eye on developments and, where necessary, call bodies to account on the wider impacts of their policies.



4. A better understanding of PSA targets for the SSSIs: It is clear that the Public Service Agreement (PSA) target for improving the condition of SSSIs is not well understood by landowners and managers and by many of the bodies with an interest in the moorlands. English Nature is engaged in reviewing the conservation objectives of each SSSI unit over the coming eighteen months. This process provides English Nature with an opportunity to explain the purpose of the PSA target and the implications it has for future management and for the targeting of agri-environment grants.

It is important that pursuit of the PSA target for SSSIs should not take place regardless of the consequences for other special qualities. This suggests that English Nature's reporting to Defra of progress against the PSA target should take account of the views of partner bodies (who will therefore need to be formally consulted) on the implications of the biological condition of each SSSI unit for their areas of responsibility or interest.

5. Establish objectives and needs for each of the moorland units: The study has made a start in identifying the individual character and needs of different areas, with a separate technical annex summarising the information that has been gathered on each of the 22 moorland units distinguished by the study. It is suggested that the National Park Authority should continue this auditing task, engaging with landowners and farmers and assessing the value and significance, condition, drivers for change and actions to achieve a sustainable future for each moorland unit.

Actions to gather evidence that will inform management

To a large degree the quality of the decisions that are made on the way the moorlands should be managed will depend on the quality of the information that is available about this management. The following five proposed actions aim to improve the quality of the information base, which is currently extremely variable.

6. Monitor changes in vegetation cover: Views on the condition of the moorlands, particularly in terms of their landscape quality and suitability for recreation, are heavily influenced by opinions on changes to the vegetation, particularly in the extent of scrub and bracken. Evidence on the height and age of heather, on the depth of purple moor grass swards and the extent of blanket bog will be crucial in determining the success of grazing and burning programmes. It is suggested that the Rural Development Service manages a contract to review evidence of trends in past vegetation cover and to establish a baseline over all of the moorlands using recent aerial photographs against which future change can be measured.

7. Evaluate the evolving condition of the moorland landscape: There has been little detailed assessment of the quality and condition of the moorlands landscape in the last 30 years. Given the importance of the moorland landscape in terms of the National Park's designation and the value that many visitors and residents attach to the area, it is important that this assessment is now undertaken. It is suggested that the National Park Authority should take responsibility for undertaking an assessment of the changing condition of the moorlands' landscape, using the recently developed national "Countryside Quality Counts" methodology.



8. Assess the condition of the archaeological resource: A survey of Scheduled Ancient Monuments and the wider Areas of Exceptional Archaeological and Historical Importance by the NPA and English Heritage is already underway. It is suggested that this assessment should follow the same broad structure as that used by English Nature for the common standards monitoring of the SSSIs' biological condition.

9. Monitor public access to, and recreational use of, the moorlands: The provision of open access to the moorlands from August 2005 under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act and the emphasis placed by Government on visitor numbers in the National Parks' funding formula means that a new approach is needed to assess the impacts of public recreation on the moorlands. Both the NPA and National Trust are planning to extend the use of automatic traffic and people counters. It is suggested that a co-ordinated strategy should be developed by these two bodies to ensure that as comprehensive picture as possible of use by different types of user, and of the quality of recreational opportunity, is gathered.

10. Co-ordinate best practice in moorland management and restoration: This study has found that local knowledge and experience from outside Exmoor on moorland management are not being used effectively to guide the management prescriptions in some schemes and initiatives. It is suggested that a 'Centre of land management excellence for the South West's upland environments' should be established on Exmoor. This would co-ordinate best practice and develop consensus (but not directly commission new research) on issues such as optimal stocking rates, techniques re-introducing heather to grass moorland, the husbandry and control of red deer, control of sheep ticks (a harmful pest of livestock and people) and the branding and marketing of moorland livestock.

A large number of bodies will need to be involved in this initiative, including those already undertaking research and those who are developing standards of best practice. It is suggested that the National Park Authority should convene an initial meeting of interested bodies and that these bodies should collectively approach the regional authorities (Government Office South West, Regional Development Agency, etc) to provide funding of staffing, set-up and running costs.

Actions to facilitate more sustainable management

The final group of suggested actions aim to assist landowners, farmers and other moorland managers to deliver the objectives that will have been agreed through the previous actions, particularly through the individual moorland audit and action plans.

11. The creation of 'moor keepers': A more integrated and 'multi-functional' approach to conserving the range of special features of the moorlands will require high standards of moorland management. It is suggested that the idea for 'moor keepers' that has been discussed before should be resurrected by the NPA with the National Trust, Badgworthy Land Company and Rural Development Service. These would be part-time posts, drawn from the existing farming community, who would act as local 'eyes and ears' of landowners and graziers, helping to deliver agreed livestock and recreational management on the ground and working closely with the NPA rangers and National Trust wardens.



12. Flexible and targeted agri-environment funding to expand the moorlands: The Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) that replaces the ESA next year will include a targeted Higher Level that is likely to be directed at the moorlands. The prescriptions of this scheme must take full account of local circumstances and knowledge on Exmoor, and project officers should be able to exercise discretion to alter prescriptions in the light of consultation with bodies as English Nature, the NPA and English Heritage.

It is suggested that Defra makes payment options available under the Higher Level of the ESS for 're-wilding' land adjoining the moorlands. Payments should be available to remove fencing against moorland and reduce the intensity of agricultural management so as to extend and enhance the large scale and open views of the moorland landscapes and to initiate the restoration of moorland habitats on land that has been agriculturally improved. The areas where this option is most appropriate will have been identified in action number 7, above, to evaluate the condition of the moorland landscape.

13. A moorland management infrastructure grant: If the agricultural management of the moorlands is to be reintegrated with mainstream livestock production systems, there will need to be investment in infrastructure that makes grazing easier in practical husbandry terms, as well as more cost effective. Facilities such as cattle grids, particularly along the A39 coast road, mobile sheep dips and temporary livestock races (fencing) will be required. It is suggested that part of the NPA's Sustainable Development Fund is preferentially allocated to grant aiding capital investment of this kind.

14. A new Moorland Enterprise Challenge Fund: The new priorities that are established for moorlands will require new innovative solutions, many of which are likely to be 'home grown'. It is suggested that a new Moorland Enterprise Challenge Fund should be established, administered by the NPA, that is open to moorland owners, managers, other businesses and the voluntary sector making sustainable use of the moorlands, to establish novel ways of delivering public benefits on the moorlands. Projects such as the launch of a moorland products brand or the creation of a new moorland activity-based tourism might be suitable for funding. The NPA will need to bid for new resources to establish this fund.

15. The future of support to moorland farms: It is clear from this study that the decoupling of the CAP taking place between 2005 and 2012, combined with changes in the market for moorland livestock, will increasingly divorce Exmoor's moorlands from mainstream livestock farming systems. There is a need for public policy to address the economic and cultural benefits provided by the moorlands which will not be picked up through agri-environment schemes or decoupled CAP support. This implies a continuing important role for LFA support running into the next Rural Development Programme. It is hoped that Defra will take this into account in its next review of the Hill Farm Allowance Scheme.

A programme for implementing the actions

This report has been produced for the Exmoor Society who it is hoped will wish to see the actions carried out. In the majority of cases, responsibility for undertaking, or initiating the action, lies with the NPA. This implies an additional action for the NPA and Exmoor Society, together, to respond to this report by drawing up a costed programme of actions, making sure that all the bodies who will need to be involved are informed of their role and engaged in the overall process of delivering a sustainable future for the moorlands.



Land Use Consultants
14 Great George St, Bristol BS1 5RH

References and notes:

¹ Sinclair G, 1966. *Can Exmoor Survive?* The Exmoor Society, Dulverton

² Porchester, 1977. *A study of Exmoor*. Report to DoE and MAFF

³ This map is based on information presented in Rowan, E 1999. *The Restoration of Upland Heath on areas previously reclaimed for agriculture – Exmoor National Park*. MSc Thesis, University College London

⁴ Lobley M et al. 2004. *The State of Farming on Exmoor 2004*. Report to Exmoor National Park Authority. Centre for Rural Research, University of Exeter