

Views About Management



A statement of English Nature's views about the management of Upton Heath Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

This statement represents English Nature's views about the management of the SSSI for nature conservation. This statement sets out, in principle, our views on how the site's special conservation interest can be conserved and enhanced. English Nature has a duty to notify the owners and occupiers of SSSI of its views about the management of the land.

Not all of the management principles will be equally appropriate to all parts of the SSSI. Also, there may be other management activities, additional to our current views, which can be beneficial to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest.

The management views set out below do not constitute consent for any operation. English Nature's written consent is still required before carrying out any operation likely to damage the features of special interest (see your SSSI notification papers for a list of these operations). English Nature welcomes consultation with owners, occupiers and users of the SSSI to ensure that the management of this site conserves and enhances the features of interest, and to ensure that all necessary prior consents are obtained.

Management Principles

The Dorset heathlands were maintained through a long history of subsistence farming. Traditionally the heathland was lightly grazed by livestock and exploited to provide fuel and materials from cutting gorse, turves and other vegetation and from local, small-scale mineral winning. These uses depleted the thin acid soils of nutrients, caused some localised disturbance and kept the land mostly free of scrub and trees. In this way the varied uses, along with natural variation in soil conditions and drainage, created conditions favouring a diversity of acid grassland, heath and mire habitats at various stages of vegetation development.

Without such management heathland becomes progressively dominated by bracken, gorse and, on wet ground, purple moor-grass tussocks. Eventually the heath will scrub over with pine and other trees that are usually of lower nature conservation value. Management that re-creates the historic conditions is required today to maintain the conservation interest. The precise management requirements and their intensity and timing will vary both between and within sites according to the needs of different heathland interests and site conditions.

Low intensity grazing using a mix of hardy livestock is the best form of management. By feeding selectively in different areas and on different plants, free roaming

livestock help to maintain variation in the vegetation composition and structure. They can also suppress scrub encroachment and provide some light poaching, creating pockets of bare peat and sandy ground that is needed by a variety of specialised plants, reptiles and invertebrates. Although some grazing all year is beneficial, the heathland should be stocked mainly between late spring and early autumn. Hardy breeds of cattle and ponies are the preferred stock because of their diet and grazing behaviour. They are also relatively tolerant of wet conditions and able to exploit poor forage with no need for supplementary feed. Exceptionally, local measures may be needed to guard against excessive trampling damage to some areas of mature heather of especial importance for rare reptiles.

Additional management is likely to be required to control any dense bracken invasion and to remove scrub and tree encroachment. This may be achieved either by mechanical control or manual cutting, and the careful application of a suitable herbicide where necessary. At most sites the heathland should appear a predominantly open landscape, but with possibly some retained individual trees and small clumps of mainly Scots pine, birch and willow. An element of native, self-established deciduous woodland fringing the heathland may add to the conservation interest by providing habitat edge environments favoured by some heathland birds and invertebrates. Mature oak is particularly valuable for these interests. A diverse woodland structure with some open space, some areas of dense understorey, and an overstorey of more mature trees is important. This may be achieved by grazing wooded areas with the heathland, creating local mosaics of woodland and heath, with some scrub and young trees.

Gorse requires active management to retain its heathland conservation value. Scattered stands with a bushy structure within the heath are more beneficial than large continuous blocks. Winter cutting of 'leggy' stands and removal of the cut material maintains gorse at different stages of re-growth for heathland species and avoids nutrient accumulation in the soil. Where gorse has become invasive, large blocks can be fragmented to encourage a mosaic with heathers either by mechanical control or manual cutting, and the careful application of a suitable herbicide where necessary. Controlled winter burning of old gorse stands can achieve similar results to cutting.

Controlled winter burning of selected, relatively small areas of heath vegetation may be a further suitable way of maintaining a diversity of vegetation structure and re-establishing areas of pioneer heath required by some species. Special care is required when some sensitive species are present, with consideration being given to timing and to providing the necessary manpower to control the burn.

Where extensive grazing or patch burning is not practical, often for example on small and isolated heathland fragments, a varied regime of patch mowing with some ground disturbance can help to encourage a more diverse heathland sward structure. The cut material needs to be removed to avoid nutrient accumulation and to allow the cut plants to re-sprout successfully and to enable new plants to grow from the seed bank in the soil. However, mowing is unlikely to be suitable on mire vegetation and on mature stands of dry heath of importance for rare reptiles.

Patches of bare sandy ground, especially within heather vegetation and associated with banks or other topographic features, are important for reptiles and many specialised heathland invertebrates. On some sites more extensive areas of bare ground, acid grassland and heath at early stages of development provide suitable conditions for a different range of heathland interests. Livestock and burrowing animals such as rabbits can create new bare ground, but there may be advantages for the conservation interests in creating further areas through periodic mechanical disturbance. The timing and scale of such disturbance will depend on local factors such as, for example, the needs of individual species of conservation concern and historical management practices on the site.

Invasive introductions such as *Rhododendron*, *Gaultheria* and, in wet situations, parrot's feather and Australian swamp stonecrop should, where practical, be eradicated from the site.

Streams and ponds considerably add to the heathland interest in providing habitat for specialised plants, amphibians and invertebrates such as dragonflies. Careful maintenance of existing ponds to establish a mixture of open water and vegetated areas is usually acceptable practice. Particular care should be taken to avoid habitat of conservation value when disposing of dredgings, and new ponds may only be acceptable in certain locations of low conservation value. Improving drainage by ditching or deepening watercourses is likely to be damaging to the wetland aspects of the conservation interest. Where possible natural drainage should be restored.

On most sites measures are likely to be necessary to control recreational and other activities which can be damaging to heathland habitats and species, for example fire setting and vehicle scrambling. Suitable measures may include a system to allow for the effective control of fires, such as access for fire-fighting vehicles, firebreaks and emergency water, and the management of access. Controlled burning or mowing can, if carefully located, also help to reduce the risk from uncontrolled fires.

Cultivation, the application of pesticides, including the use of persistent veterinary products on livestock, or any fertilisers, including manures and liming, are usually damaging and should be avoided. Herbicides should also generally be avoided, but some types can be helpful when targeted on the control of certain invasive species.