

Preface by Professor David Norman, Acting Chairman of English Nature

Anyone with a love of the countryside and wildlife cannot fail to be moved by the splendour of the New Forest. In any season it is a magnificent spectacle, for the casual visitor or dedicated ecologist alike. Its woods and heaths combine to form a nature conservation resource of unparalleled importance in north-west Europe.

The New Forest is not an un-managed wilderness. On the contrary, with over 5,000 years of human interventions it is apparent that the rich and special wildlife interest has evolved in parallel with man's use. The Forest's future well being depends upon the continued sensitive management of its special habitats.

Sensitive management of such a complex ecosystem in multiple ownership requires careful planning, and I am delighted to welcome the publication of the New Forest candidate SAC Management Plan. It represents the culmination of extensive discussions, negotiations and consultations over the past four years and has led to a degree of mutual understanding and co-operation between practitioners and regulators in key organisations unprecedented in the history of the New Forest. It has been made possible through funding from the EC through its LIFE programme, reflecting pan-European interest in the future of the New Forest.

The New Forest is not without difficult issues for nature conservation. Previous land management policies and regimes have left a mixed legacy. Centuries of common grazing, cutting and more recently, burning programmes have developed and maintained a suite of habitats second to none on comparable sites across Europe. But some habitats have suffered through wetland drainage, tree planting or neglect, and consequently are no longer in favourable condition; others have yet to realise their full potential. Further resources will be required to address these problems. The New Forest is one of the last remaining wild areas in a very crowded southern England, lying between two enormous conurbations of Bournemouth in the west and Southampton in the east. As such it attracts enormous numbers of visitors every year; up to 18 million per year; a popularity recognised by government in its National Park proposals. It is right that the public have the opportunity to visit and experience the wonder of the New Forest but visitors have themselves to be managed carefully to protect fragile habitats.

This Management Plan is a landmark in the history of the New Forest, and I believe signals the beginning of a new era for the management and restoration of this unique site. I commend the principle authors, Russell Wright and Diana Westerhoff, for its production.

Summary

The New Forest is one of the most important places for nature conservation in Europe on account of its sheer size, diversity and quality of wildlife habitats present. These habitats have evolved in parallel with human use over the centuries, and there is a continuing need for them to be sensitively managed if the New Forest is to remain truly exceptional. This requirement for management, coupled with the complexity of the site, necessitates the production of a Management Plan to which all the main organisations concerned with the New Forest are committed, in particular those representing the local community.

Never before has such a comprehensive Management Plan with the potential for far-reaching improvements for nature conservation been attempted. Its production has only been possible because of the enthusiastic formation of an effective and innovative partnership, together with essential funding from the EU LIFE Nature Programme under the New Forest LIFE Partnership Programme 1998-2001.

The New Forest SAC, which covers some 29,000 ha, supports a complex mosaic of wildlife habitats, formerly common in lowland western Europe but now rare and fragmented. The major components are the extensive wet and dry heaths with their rich valley mires and associated wet and dry grasslands, the ancient pasture and enclosed woodlands, the network of clean rivers and streams and frequent permanent and temporary ponds. Outstanding examples of thirteen habitats of European interest are represented together with two priority habitat types, namely bog woodland and riverine woodland.

The habitats support an exceptional variety of plants and animals. This includes the richest moss and lichen flora in lowland Europe, scarce flowering plants such as slender cotton-grass, wild gladiolus, pennyroyal and small fleabane and an outstanding community of invertebrates dependent upon the ancient forest trees and other grazed habitats. In addition, the New Forest is a Special Protection Area and has the largest number of Dartford warbler in Britain and internationally important populations of nightjar and woodlark. The populations of southern damselfly in boggy flushes along stream sides are of particular note as well as great crested newt in the ponds and stag beetle associated with the abundant dead wood in the New Forest.

The quality of the habitats of the New Forest, and the rich diversity of species which they support, is dependent upon the management activities of the various owners and occupiers. Of fundamental importance throughout the Crown Lands and Adjacent Commons is the persistence of a pastoral economy based on the existence of Rights of Common. The commoners' stock, mainly cattle and ponies, roam freely over extensive areas of the New Forest, playing a vital role in keeping open habitats free of scrub and controlling the more aggressive species such as bracken and

Summary

purple-moor grass, and maintaining the richness and variety of heathland and wood pasture habitats. This is complemented by the annual heathland burning and cutting programmes which ensure that at any one time there is an extensive range of structurally diverse habitats available for plants and animals to utilise.

The Management Plan explains how the various habitats must be managed into the future to address current and foreseeable problems and opportunities, and the needs of the special habitats and species, with the ultimate goal of achieving favourable condition for all European features.

The Plan includes Implementation plans, produced by individuals for all land managing Partners to cover works for the next 5 years.

In the case of the Forestry Commission the implementation plans for the Crown lands are split into five separate headings for Pasture Woodland, Heathland, Inclosure woodland, Deer and Recreation.

English Nature have provided implementation plans for their National Nature Reserve holdings at Langley Wood and Kingston Great Common. They have also produced Site Management Statements agreed between English Nature and the private owners and occupiers for managing the privately owned SAC lands. Where necessary these may form the basis of formal management agreements with English Nature.

The National Trust have provided implementation plans for their holdings at Bramshaw Commons, Rockford and Ibsley Commons, Hightown Common and Hale Purlieu. The Hampshire Wildlife Trust have provided implementation plans for their nature reserve at Roydon Woods. The Wiltshire Wildlife Trust have provided implementation plans for their nature reserve at Landford Bog.

Hampshire County Council have provided implementation plans for their holdings at Hyde and Gorley Commons and part of Rockford and Ibsley Commons.

Acknowledgements

Parts 1 (Description), 2 (Evaluation) and 3 (Generic Prescriptions) of this Management Plan have been produced by Russell Wright and Diana Westerhoff of English Nature in consultation with the LIFE partners and other New Forest organisations and individuals. It has been greatly improved by the expert contributions and comments of those with a deep understanding and high regard for the future of the New Forest and it is appropriate to record thanks to the following in particular.

To Anthony Pasmore for his outstanding contribution on the land use history of the Crown lands and wider SAC, Eileen Moss for the section on archaeology, Chris Anderson and Richard Manley of the Commoners Defence Association for their contribution on commoning and their detailed comments on all aspects of the evolving management plan, and Mike Seddon of the Forestry Commission for his contribution on recreation.

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To the Deputy Surveyor, Donald Thompson and all of his staff at the Forestry Commission who patiently contributed to negotiations surrounding the production of the Management Plan.

To the Verderers, especially Maldwin Drummond and Peter Roberts with whom I have discussed the plan on behalf of the Verderers and whose comments have been integrated.

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Synopsis of contents

The Management Plan consists of four main parts; Description (Part 1), Evaluation (Part 2), Generic Prescriptions (Part 3) and Implementation Plans (Part 4).

Part 1 provides a summary description, a non-technical description and a full technical description. The latter describes the SAC habitats in terms of the National Vegetation Classification and the Corine Classification as it applies to the Habitats Directive, and the habitats (and species) for which the SAC has been selected.

Part 2 sets out the various designations, the obligations arising from those designations, and provides a comparative evaluation of the nature conservation importance of the New Forest's habitats and species. It also provides a more holistic evaluation at the ecosystem level using the established Ratcliffe criteria. The nature conservation objectives for European features are set out. Finally a SAC-wide monitoring system based upon condition assessment is described and a preliminary overview on habitat condition is given with priorities for further action.

Part 3 describes and discusses the issues which have the potential to significantly affect the condition of SAC habitats and species. It provides a suite of generic prescriptions for maintaining habitats in favourable condition, and a further suite for restoring habitats to favourable condition.

Part 4 contains the individual implementation plans for the management of the Partners holdings. In the case of the Forestry Commission the implementation plans for the Crown lands are split into five separate headings for Pasture Woodland, Heathland, Inclosure woodland, Deer and Recreation. An executive overview is included.

English Nature have provided implementation plans for their National Nature Reserve holdings at Langley Wood and Kingston Great Common. They have also produced Site Management Statements agreed between English Nature and the private owners and occupiers for managing the privately owned SAC lands. Where necessary these may form the basis of formal management agreements with English Nature.

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Contents

Preface by Professor David Norman	i
Signatory Page	ii
Summary	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Synopsis of Contents	vi
Contents	viii
Introduction	viii
Part 1: Description	1.1
Part 2: Evaluation, Monitoring and Priorities for Management	2.1
Part 3: Generic Prescriptions	3.1
Bibliography	
Appendix 1: SSSI/SPA/SAC Maps	
Appendix 2: Citations and OLD's	
Appendix 3: Condition assessment Templates and Guidance.	
Appendix 4: Condition assessment tables.	

Introduction

The New Forest is one of the most important places for nature conservation in Europe on account of its sheer size, diversity and quality of wildlife habitats present. These habitats have evolved in parallel with human use over the centuries, and there is a continuing need for them to be sensitively managed if the New Forest is to remain truly exceptional. This requirement for management, coupled with the complexity of the site, necessitates the production of a Management Plan to which all the main organisations concerned with the New Forest are committed, in particular those representing the local community.

This is such a plan, prepared for the whole of the SAC site for at least the next 5 years. It is likely to require substantial revision in 5 years time (2006), when significant progress towards achieving the nature conservation objectives will have been made.

Never before has such a comprehensive Management Plan with the potential for far-reaching improvements for nature conservation been attempted. Its production has only been possible because of the enthusiastic formation of an effective and innovative partnership, together with essential funding from the EU LIFE Nature Programme under the New Forest LIFE Partnership Programme 1998-2001. The production of a SAC-wide Management Plan and monitoring system were key objectives submitted by the LIFE Partnership in their original application of 1997.

The LIFE Partnership comprises ten organisations, Hampshire County Council, (the project proponent on behalf of the New Forest Committee, and land owner), English Nature, (statutory regulator, advisor and land manager), the Forestry Commission (public body and land manager), the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust (non-governmental organisation and land owner), the National Trust (non-governmental organisation and land owner), the New Forest Committee (non-statutory public body and project coordinator), the Ninth Centenary Trust (non-governmental organisation), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (non-governmental organisation), the Verderers of the New Forest (public body), and the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust (non-governmental organisation and land owner).

The Management Plan describes the New Forest's features of European importance for nature conservation and the cultural factors which have a significant bearing upon their well being. The SAC is evaluated at the national and European level, a monitoring system based upon condition assessment is described and priorities are set for site management. Issues which have a significant ability to impact on the condition of SAC habitats and species are described and a set of generic prescriptions for habitat maintenance and restoration are provided. Implementation plans have been produced by land managing partners in accordance with the generic prescriptions.