

Conclusions of Site and Vegetation Monitoring

Walk over visits to Life 3 work sites following restoration, together with the results of vegetation monitoring show that habitat restoration is already starting to having a positive impact.

Although it is still very early days in terms of habitat recovery, the first signs are emerging that vegetation communities are responding to changes in tree cover and soil moisture.

Recovery is particularly good in the mire systems especially those sites that have had a season or more to start recovery, for example at Slufters and Broomy Bottom. Vegetation change is also significant at Newlyns.

Riverine woodland habitat will take longer to reveal significant signs of change in terms of the development of true riverine woodland communities. However the effects of seasonal flooding and restoration of geomorphological processes on the floodplain is already noticeable. This is particularly evident when walking though restored areas such as Dameslough, Redrise/Markway and parts of Blackwater and Highland Water that experienced more frequent inundation through the winter of 05/06.

In areas that were completely cleared of conifer and the river modified, for example through Dameslough, the early stages of succession have already started. Monitoring of vegetation shows subtle changes in species distribution starting in response to soil moisture variations. Vegetation is also starting to colonise the once bare ground. The introduction of grazing by ponies is already making a significant impact with areas of lawn starting to develop along the floodplain.

The comparison of vegetation communities within grazed areas (by both deer and horses) against areas within Enclosure Plots reveal quite striking differences in the vegetation succession, not so much in general species composition but more in terms of the density of key species such as pioneering Birch. As would be expected, the density of broadleaved saplings of Oak, Ash and Hawthorn is strongly correlated to the presence of a nearby "mother tree".

It will be interesting to see, through continued monitoring of vegetation communities into the future, how quickly typical NVC communities attributable to the target habitat types develop and what variations may occur but it is clear that the process has already started.

However, it is not only vegetation communities that are starting to respond. It was highly encouraging to note the presence of wader species, notably curlew and lapwing on the cleared areas within Markway Inclosure that a few months before had supported dense conifer stands. Nightjars were also present in a number of the enclosure plots set up in Highland Water under Life 3. So it can be concluded that there are already a number of positive changes to wetland habitats in response to work carried out under Life 3 providing real benefits to New Forest priority SAC habitats.