

Bringing Cattle Back to East London

In the last edition of Ranger we heard how the Malvern Hills re-introduced grazing to their hills and commons. Now read how a similar challenge was approached in the urban fringe of east London by Lee Valley Regional Park Rangers.

THE SITE

The site in question is Walthamstow Marshes in Leyton which is a SSSI and one of the few surviving areas of "Lammas Land" (common grazing) in London. The marshes extend over 100 hectares though the area to be grazed in our initial pilot study was only 10 hectares. The marshes are criss-crossed by footpaths and wishways and attract over 100,000 visitors per year

DON'T FENCE ME IN!

We no doubt faced the same problem as others before us when wanting to re-introduce cattle to urban fringe sites - the need to put up fencing versus the strong objections of some local people. The fencing issue one was potentially the most awkward because some people see red when fences are mentioned.

"The only purpose of a fence is to keep people out isn't it?"

Well no, it's to keep the cattle in.

"But people will see a fence and think that they're not meant to go inside it won't they?"

Well, we'll install kissing gates for ease of access.

"But a fence will completely destroy the open character of the marsh which people cherish and it will be an eyesore!"

Well, the marsh is a nature reserve and a SSSI and we need the cattle on it to stop it losing its special wildlife status. We eventually got around the perceived visual intrusion caused by the fence by using post and wire fencing; not only that, but we used green wire (it looks lovely).

BEEF ON THE BARBIE?

However, the key card for us was the cattle themselves. There were perceived problems of course.....

"You can't put cattle out there, they'll end up on someone's barbecue!"



Definitely a danger, but an over-exaggerated one – they've been there now for about 6 months during one of our best summers for barbecues ever and we haven't lost any. The site is fairly well secured from cow-nappers as we have hardened locks on heavy steel gates at the entrance to the site.

We were lucky with the cows themselves. We are fortunate in that Lee Valley Park has a visitor farm so we ended up with a very nice if somewhat motley collection of six animals - two Old English Longhorns, two Belted Galloways, a Longhorn Cross (brown cow, well steer) and a Dexter. They came people-trained too! Naturally one of the concerns was that people would be frightened of them though in reality even the fearsome-looking

Longhorns are very docile. However, it is quite useful that kids think they look dangerous. Another issue is peoples' concern about the welfare of the animals so our farm staff check them every week or two whilst the rangers check them at least twice a day. We also have contact numbers posted on the fence as we've always recognised that the public would be our best means of spotting anything untoward going on with the beasties. You know, kids throwing stones at them or chasing them, not that untoward! The marsh has a ditch and a pond so water isn't a problem. They've also got a mineral block if they want it.

ACCESS

Another potential problem was whether the cattle might affect existing access rights on the marsh. Dog-walkers were an obvious source of potential conflict. We'd always reckoned on being able to solve this with gates in the right places whilst at the same time expecting dog-walkers to be responsible! In the end we chose an area of the marsh with no paths and only very minor wish ways. We haven't had any problems yet but may do in the future if we try to expand the area under grazing.

DIVINE INTERVENTION?

One of the big questions for us was where to establish our trial grazing area. We originally had a meeting with our local User Forum where we outlined some options and came up against significant opposition, mainly on account of the fencing requirement. This was despite having the backing of conservationists, English Nature and the local authority. What would we do next?



Well - in July 2002 local botanist Brian Wurzell discovered a rare plant on the marsh, Creeping Marshwort, found on just one other site in the country. And strange to say, the best approach to conserving this plant was to graze! Two winters previously we had re-profiled the ditch where we found the Marshwort. It was one of a number of new or re-found species resulting from our ditch re-profiling programme. It also shows the value of getting an expert botanist in to check over your site

now and again. Anyway, this meant that we now knew where we needed to focus our grazing efforts. Delineating the area was then fairly easy, only slightly complicated by the presence of Water Voles.

CONSULTATION WINS THROUGH

The presence of this plant also bolstered our confidence when we next put our plans before our User Forum, which we worked through more thoroughly this time. We went through all the arguments again, let them choose the style of fencing and where they wanted access points and then later we invited them for a mid-summer walk to assess the impact of the fencing and cattle.

Having done our consultation with the local community through the forum, we then put up signage on site to inform people of our proposals for the coming spring. The big day (in May) arrived and our six cattle trotted on to the marsh - a bit like Gandalf reappearing in Hobbiton. The locals walked around the enclosure with curiosity and the brave ones even went up and chatted to the animals. The first few days were the best for me as one of the cows had just been parted from its calf and so spent the first few days and nights moo-ing. What a lovely sound in the middle of London, the nearby Clapton-ites must have got a bit of a shock. The presence of the cattle certainly drew more people and more families in to the marsh proper to have a close-up view of the cows.

So when the User Forum visited in July we had a positive tale to tell and they were generally pretty happy. But - there's always one though isn't there?

"You never said you were going to put the fence there! When we came around on our 'Beating the Bounds' walk we couldn't get to our hugging tree."

"Okay" we said, " we'll put another gate in."

EVERYONE'S A WINNER

However, we've done it; we've finally achieved our initial aim of re-introducing cattle grazing to the marsh. Local people like the cattle and will be keen to see them back in 2004 – in fact the local User Forum – you'll remember there weren't too keen – well they are demanding we announce the return date. There are however hurdles ahead. We've grazed May to October in 2003 but since tradition is to graze from Lammas Day (1st August for us), we may be constrained from bringing them on before this date. We'd also like to eventually graze elsewhere on the marsh, but there are pros and cons to everything and if that's what we decide we need – well, we'll just have to come up with a persuasive justification for it.

After all - hoping for divine intervention twice might be pushing our luck!

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