

Getting into Condition with Phil Page

A site manager looks at SSSIs and favourable condition

There are over 4000 SSSIs in England covering around one million hectares of land and these play a key role in the protection and conservation of our wildlife and geology. They include small



areas that protect populations of a single species, to large areas of upland moorland or coastal mudflats. The Government has set a Public Service Agreement (PSA) target that 95% of SSSI land, by area, should be in 'favourable condition' by 2010. English Nature assesses the condition of SSSIs using categories agreed for the UK through the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. Condition is a measure of both the quality of the special habitat and species features on SSSIs and of the land management being carried out to recover or conserve them.

In December 2003 English Nature published the results of its six-year survey into the condition of England's SSSIs, which showed 58 per cent by area were in favourable condition, with 42 per cent needing improvement. In contrast 71.3% of the land on National Nature Reserves (NNRs) is in good condition. Causes of unfavourability on NNRs in most cases are where leases and existing agreements are not enabling the necessary management to be carried out. In addition there are 'external factors' such as diffuse pollution and 'coastal squeeze'.

How does English Nature Make an Assessment of SSSI Condition?

In order to make a condition assessment conservation objectives are drawn up for each SSSI. These are based on the features for which the site was designated and which are contained in the SSSI Citation and the Notification papers.



The objectives are based on a series of attributes - for woodlands these are Area, Processes/structure, Regeneration, Species Composition and Quality Indicators (e.g. species and species assemblages associated with the habitat). A set of tables with targets for the components of the attributes, measurable wherever possible, are then produced. These can be tailored to local conditions and to reflect local distinctiveness, whilst allowing a national overview to be maintained.

Each SSSI is divided up into site units which are usually based on ownership or well defined habitat boundaries or combinations of these. Each site unit is assessed individually. From the attribute tables a set of field sheets are produced which allow the systematic assessment of all the criteria associated with each attribute. In order to be defined as favourable a unit must score positively on all the attributes. It is not necessary, however, for all the target criteria for each attribute to be met. The more prescriptive the targets are, the higher the likely level of management intervention. required

Preparing for the Assessment

The assessment is carried out in the field but careful preparation is required.....as the great man once said "...time spent on preparation (i.e. reconnaissance) is seldom wasted". Survey reports/maps/photographs provide valuable background material to inform the assessment. Assessments should be carried out at least once every six years. A route is prepared across the site (1:10,000

scale map) that gives good coverage of the major communities and site features. The site is walked using a series of observation stops where assessments notes are made using the field recording sheets.

- The categories for condition are:
- Favourable
- Unfavourable - recovering
- Unfavourable - no change
- Unfavourable - declining
- Partially destroyed
- Destroyed

How does English Nature work to achieve the target that 95% of SSSI land should be in favourable condition by 2010?



The PSA target is for all public sector bodies, not just English Nature, and we cannot achieve it without working in partnership with others such as local authorities, the water companies, the Ministry of Defence and similar large landowners. One of the main ways English Nature is achieving the target is by negotiating Management Agreements with owners and occupiers to provide the funding necessary for carrying out the required work. At Dawlish Warren, one of Devon's nine National Nature Reserves, a programme of scrub removal and a grazing scheme is being used to achieve favourable condition by 2006. This work aims to restore parts of the internationally

important dune grassland which have been lost to scrub expansion. It is being carried out through a funding partnership between English Nature and Teignbridge District Council.

In other cases it may not be so straightforward, especially in relation to freshwater and coastal systems where diffuse water pollution or coastal defences and flooding are responsible for sites not being in favourable condition.

What can the ranger/site manager do to help achieve the target?

Under the CROW Act all public bodies (s28G authorities) have "a duty in exercising their functions to take reasonable steps to further the conservation and enhancement of SSSIs". So make sure you know which, if any, parts of your sites are SSSIs and liaise with your local English Nature officer to check out the current favourability situation. If the site is unfavourable then it's time to start doing something about it! Upland broadleaf woodland SSSIs cover 1761 hectares in Devon and are mainly located on Dartmoor and its fringes. 97% of this area is in favourable condition. In contrast upland dwarf shrub heath covers 2716 hectares of which only 30% is in favourable condition. The main causes of this are overgrazing, burning and undergrazing.

Woods that are in favourable condition display a mixture of structures with some open space, old trees and dead wood and a variety of different vegetation layers. There should be evidence of regeneration and the trees and shrubs present should be predominantly indigenous to the site. Locally distinctive elements such as rich ground flora or lichen and moss communities are also indicative of condition (see PHOTOS).

OTHER REFERENCES: *Objective setting and condition monitoring within woodland Sites of Special Scientific Interest* (2002) English Nature Research Report No. 472