

The Verderers of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme

Annual Report for 2015

We are now well into the second half of our 10 year Higher Level Stewardship scheme, with less than 4 years to go. In previous years I have always started with a précis of what the HLS is, what we do and which organisations are involved. You know all this now, so this year I want to emphasise the importance of the HLS to the New Forest.

The New Forest suffers over time by a ratchet affect. No one activity will by itself ruin it, and each disturbance taken in isolation may on the face of it appear negligible. But add up every human intervention, such as artificial drainage, car parks, gravel tracks, utility structures such as telegraph poles or pumping stations, and incrementally over time we see the significant loss of grazing, loss of landscape amenity, loss of habitat, and loss of good environmental condition.

Through the HLS, we are funding projects to conserve or improve the ecology and environment of the New Forest Crown Lands. We find ourselves in an impoverished financial climate within the public sector, so the £2,000,000 per year which we are spending from the HLS is absolutely fundamental to the future good condition of the New Forest.

This money enables us to turn the clock back to remove previous man-made interventions. We are improving the landscape amenity of the forest. We are improving grazing for the benefit of the forest stock, which are the architects of our beautiful New Forest landscape.

Our wetland restorations remove man-made drainage, so damaging to the ecology encourage the re-establishment of the flood plain, depositing beneficial organic matter on the forest rather than it being washed out to sea. And a happy by-product is to reduce flood risk downstream.

Many years ago, while riding my horse around the forest, I first became aware of wetland restorations as a work in progress, and frankly, I thought then that they were a waste of public money. However, over the years I saw the speed with which the forest recovers, and the benefits which removing man-made drainage channels bring: a raised water table, re-establishment of the flood plain, improved grazing, a more natural-looking and attractive landscape.

So I am a convert, and like all converts, I am a zealot in my advocacy of the benefits of using this HLS money to turn the clock back, re-creating a more natural, less artificial environment, with benefits for the overall ecology of the New Forest.

We are experiencing some concerted opposition to our wetland work, and happily we live in a democracy with its foundation on freedom of speech, so this opposition is entirely proper. It is therefore up to us to win the debate, and provide justification for our plans. Some opposition is based on scientific principles; some on the use of public money; and some is based on what people are used to seeing in "their" area. However, the time horizon of us humans is very short, compared to the 937 years since the legal governance of the New Forest was formalised in 1079.

In recognition of this opposition, we are improving our presentation of information, to make it less technical, easier to understand in plain English. And we are expanding our public engagement to help improve understanding. The HLS board and I strongly believe in the desired outcomes of the wetland restorations, and we strongly believe that we are doing the right thing for the New Forest.

In 2015, major wetland restoration projects were carried out at Cowley's Heath in the south east between Beaulieu and Holbury, and Harvestslade near Burley. Indeed at Harvestslade, trout were filmed spawning only weeks after completion.

Our terrestrial work on the New Forest is increasing in importance and is providing ecological benefits as well as improved grazing. We have removed 136 acres of rhododendron. We have restored 56 acres of lost lawns. We have removed self-seeded non-native conifers over 316 acres of open forest. We have carried out heather removal over 32 acres. And we have done 355 acres of bracken control.

We are keen that the HLS leaves a legacy for the future. In 2015 we have rebuilt the stock pounds at Blackwater, Coppice of Linwood, Tuckers Bridge and Durhill, in hardwood for longevity. 2016 plans include Woodgreen, Holmsley, Appleslade and Woodfidley; again, these will be built in hardwood.

As the number of cars in use increases, we are seeing a huge loss of grazing and thus habitat interest: areas of grass on the edge of roads or outside houses are being lost to bare gravel. You have all seen it. The causes are widespread: over-running the verge at junctions; dog walkers not using car parks; car parking in villages; ignorance from visitors. We are therefore funding a programme of works which will protect eroded verges, and in the longer term allow re-growth of natural vegetation. This verge restoration programme has been slow to get going, but we have plans for work this year in Woodgreen and around East Boldre.

2,931 pupils had great learning experiences in the New Forest throughout 2015, thanks to the HLS education access funding. 35 schools benefitted from the funding across 50 visits. 79% of the visits were attended by primary school children, with the most popular topic being "Introduction to the Forest". The most popular enquiry from secondary school groups was to better understand the impacts of tourism. A visit from St Lukes Primary School gave the following feedback "the activities helped the children engage with the Forest and kept their interest all day, quite a feat given that they all live in the Forest". Freegrounds Junior School commented that "Once again a brilliant day and another cohort of year 4 children educated about the Forest".

In my view, our best value is the money we give annually to the New Forest Non-Native Plants Removal Project. Thank you to Catherine Chatters at the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust for her management. Last year she arranged for control of parrots feather at four sites, control of bog arum at Ipley, control of skunk cabbage and Montbretia on Mill Lawn Brook, control of Japanese Knotweed at 4 sites, control of Japanese Iris at 3 sites, control of buddleia near Wittensford, control of Himalayan honeysuckle at Nomansland, control of Himalayan balsam on Mill Lawn Brook and Beaulieu River, and control of pitcher plant across various sites. And she has found time to start mapping of cotoneaster across the Forest. All this for £12,000 a year! Well done Catherine.

Combined with previous years' work, we have now completed 30,000 acres of LiDAR analysis, which is over 60% of the HLS area, and we are on target to complete the analysis by 2020. Over the last year volunteers have undertaken 145 volunteer days, ranging from survey work, data cleaning and heritage events where they have represented the projects work. Our LiDAR exhibition at the New Forest Centre had nearly 20,000 visitors. The video created as part of the exhibition has been viewed over 32,000 times on YouTube. Lawrence Shaw at the National Park Authority is running this project, and is doing a terrifically good job. I would also like to thank his team of willing volunteers.

As the land manager for the New Forest, the Forestry Commission's HLS team deserves credit. It is led by Jane Smith, with the terrestrial team of Lucy Andrews and Alex Howells, and the wetland team of Sonia Lorenzo-Martin, Sarah Oakley, and Nick Wardlaw, with Grace Herve providing invaluable admin support. I am very grateful for your detailed work which is so valuable in our restoration of the New Forest, so a big thank you.

Finally a big thank you to Leanne Sargeant, who has administered the VGS and the HLS for the last two years, including organising this AGM. Leanne is leaving us to return to the hands-on fieldwork of ecology. We have been lucky to have you in the team Leanne, and we wish you well with the continuation of your career as an ecologist.

The projects that I have described today demonstrate again why the Verderers' Higher Level Stewardship Scheme is such an important funding stream: it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reverse the ratchet effect of man's slow ruination of the common land, and we must therefore continue to use this money for the maximum benefit of our beautiful, unique, working New Forest.

Dominic May, Official Verderer
Chairman, Verderers of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme
13th April 2016