



Grazing & Near-Natural Woodlands in the West Weald

**Report on Meeting held on 19th June 2008
by the Sussex Wildlife Trust
with the British Ecological Society and Grazing Animal Project**

A full-day meeting was held in and around Petworth, West Sussex, for sixty participants from around the UK. The meeting focussed on the experience of the Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT) in applying more natural conservation management approaches using grazing animals in an internationally important forest landscape. The programme included presentations and discussions, combined with field excursions to The Mens and Ebernoe Common Special Areas of Conservation and the adjacent Butcherland Fields SWT reserve. Sponsorship for the event was kindly provided by the British Ecological Society (BES).

Following a welcome from Professor Adrian Newton, Chair of the BES Forest Ecology Group, delegates heard **presentations** from SWT's West Weald Landscape Project Manager, Rich Howorth, about the nature and special values of this exceptionally well-wooded area and the landscape ecology framework in place for conserving it. SWT's Conservation Manager, James Power, illustrated the alternative naturalistic grazing approach being pursued in and around Ebernoe Common, focussed on promoting a near-natural area for natural processes to operate more freely. SWT's extensive ecological research on the three reserves in the West Weald was described, including detailed vegetation baseline and monitoring datasets and assessments of browsing influence used to inform site management and obtain insights in to ecosystem dynamics. These studies (see www.westweald.org.uk/publications.htm) document the increasing prevalence of holly in the woodland understorey in the absence of management, and show how cattle are influencing vegetation succession in SWT's arable reversion fields adjacent to Ebernoe.

Participants were taken on **field visits** around three SWT reserves:

1. **Ebernoe Common SAC/NNR** – a 76 ha pasture woodland reserve with internationally significant Barbastelle and Bechstein's bat communities, at which limited grazing by Sussex cattle has been reinstated in the last decade.
2. **Butcherland Fields** – a 63 ha area of ex-arable land next to Ebernoe Common where a mosaic of future pasture woodland is being encouraged to develop through natural succession subject to extensive livestock grazing.

3. **The Mens SAC** - a 160 ha former pasture and then high forest woodland subject to a deliberate minimum-intervention regime (combined with long-term ecological research) for the past 35 years, with little forest management for over a hundred years. Woodland gap dynamics from natural disturbance (especially 1987 storm impacts) and tree mortality are clearly evident here.

The final **plenary** session, facilitated by Jim Swanson (Local Grazing Schemes Co-ordinator for Southern England, Grazing Animals Project), generated a wide range of issues about progressing near-natural management approaches:

NATURE CONSERVATION

- Need for adequate space (minimum 10,000 acres?) and time for a near-natural areas approach, set against the conventional short-term target-led approach of agencies and funders e.g. BAP, SSSI status, land management grant schemes inflexibility.
- Need for consistent management (over 15–20+ years) and tangible milestones in a 100-year plus vision (?).
- Challenge and potential conflicts of conserving multiple key species using a more natural conservation approach, especially within the fixed restrictions of individual designated sites.
- Scope to reduce species-led management by addressing habitat fragmentation through enhanced interconnectivity where practical.
- Increasing costs of land acquisition by conservation bodies.
- Tolerance of wildlife impacts? e.g. severe deer browsing of ancient woodland
- Fear of failure and poor leadership amongst nature conservation managers.
- Psychological difficulty of moving away from conservation of cultural landscapes and biodiversity (p-)reserves. "How natural can we allow?!"

GRAZING MANAGEMENT

- Health, welfare and legal requirements of keeping livestock in extensive/naturalistic grazing systems.
- Common land legislation restrictions on fencing for livestock grazing.
- Practical difficulties of instituting a landscape-scale grazing system across multiple ownerships and land use objectives.

WORKING WITH OTHERS

- Competing demands and conflicting advice over land use (e.g. food versus wildlife), and the practical/political scope for near-natural landscapes.
- Persuading other people with different values, within and outside of nature conservation, of the desirability/feasibility of more natural larger-scale approaches.
- Need for better communication and relationship skills to deal with difficult reactions from the public and land owners.
- Need to collate research evidence to present rationale to countryside-users.
- Importance of sharing existing best practice in the UK and beyond.
- Learning from other case study areas with substantial experience of large-scale grazing and public acceptance, including Burnham Beeches, Epping Forest, the New Forest and Wicken Fen (expansion area).

