

# Target 2010 – North West

The condition of the region's Sites of Scientific Interest in 2005



working towards *Natural England*  
for people, places and nature



Duddon Estuary SSSI, Cumbria. Paul Glendell/English Nature 24,507

Sites of Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are the very best wildlife and geological sites in England. The Government has signed a Public Service Agreement (PSA) to ensure that, by area, 95 per cent of these sites are in the best possible condition (target condition) by 2010.

This publication is one of nine regional documents produced as sister publications to the national report *Target 2010 – the condition of England’s Sites of Special Scientific Interest in 2005* (English Nature 2006). It reviews the current situation in the North West region and details the progress that has been made towards the 2010 target since September 2003. It summarises the major factors affecting SSSI condition and some of the key actions that need to be carried out over the next five years if the target is to be achieved in the region. The report should be read in conjunction with the Target 2010 report mentioned above, which sets the national context, and also contains useful definitions of the Government’s PSA target for SSSIs, and what is meant by target condition.

# The North West picture

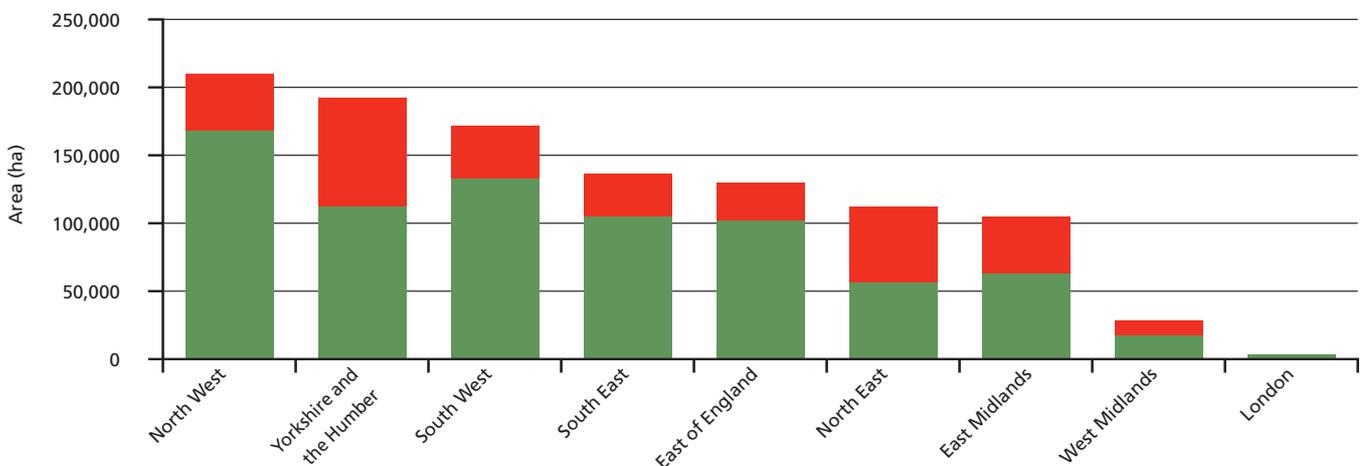
**Figure 1** Distribution and condition of SSSI units in the North West



The North West Region comprises the counties of Cheshire, Cumbria, Lancashire, and includes the major conurbations of Greater Manchester and Merseyside. It is a region of contrasts – from the spectacular coast and the unique uplands of Cumbria and the Pennines to the highly developed and intensively managed lowlands of the Mersey Basin, Lancashire and Cheshire – and supports a diverse mix of wildlife.

There are 440 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in the North West covering more than 203,000 hectares - just over 19 per cent of all SSSI land in England. This significant total is explained in part by the presence of extensive areas of upland habitat, coastal areas, bog and open water. Of the nine English regions, the North West contains the largest area of SSSI land (Figure 2). At 78.8 per cent, it also has the highest percentage of its SSSIs meeting the 2010 target.

**Figure 2** Area and condition of SSSIs in England's nine government regions



# Progress towards the 2010 target

In the past two years, excellent progress has been made towards the 2010 PSA target in the North West. Back in September 2003, 60.2 per cent of SSSI land in the region was in target condition - a figure that, as of 31 December 2005, has risen to 78.8 per cent (Figure 3), significantly ahead of the national figure of 69.8 per cent. The 18 per cent swing to target condition is an excellent achievement and, in terms of area, means that nearly 40,000 hectares of SSSI have been brought into target condition in the region during this period. This huge step forward reflects the hard work of landowners, managers and organisations able to fund such work, and often involves many years of careful land stewardship and management. In particular, there has been a major move towards target condition on upland SSSIs, through work on Environmentally Sensitive Area, Countryside Stewardship and Sheep Wildlife Enhancement schemes, and on intertidal SSSIs following close collaboration with partners. However, with more than 43,000 hectares of SSSI land not in target condition, there is clearly still a great deal of effort required over the next five years in order to achieve the PSA target by 2010.



Skiddaw Group SSSI and Derwent Water, Lake District. Paul Glendell/English Nature 23,079A



**Figure 3** Progress towards PSA target in the North West since September 2003

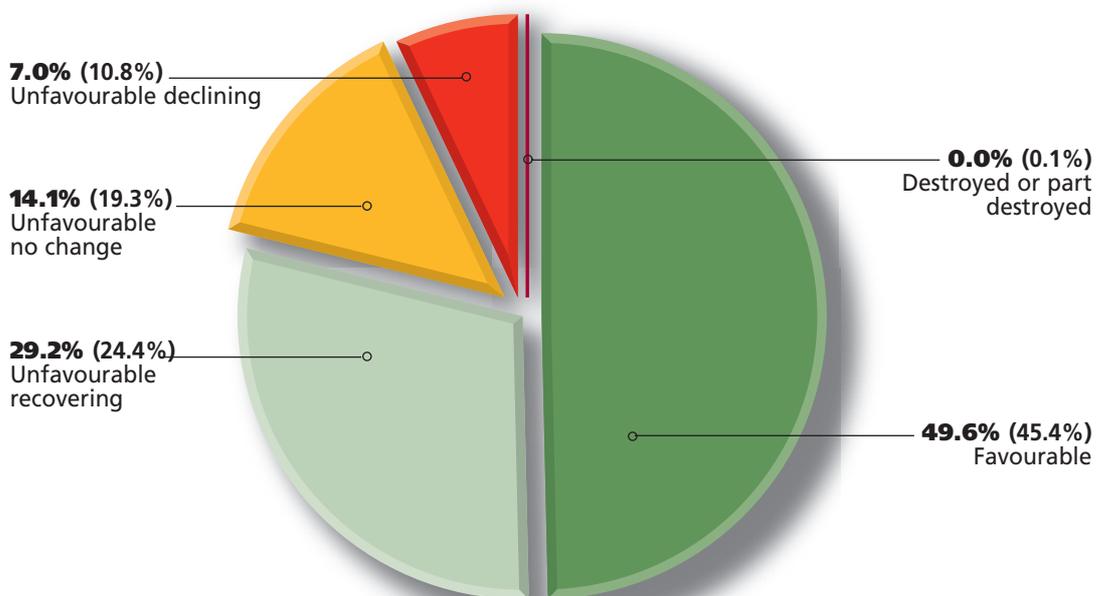
	In target condition		Not in target condition	
	%	Area (ha)	%	Area (ha)
<b>September 2003</b>	59.2	124,745	40.8	85,798
<b>December 2005</b>	78.8	163,141	21.2	43,778

All land designated as SSSI in England is part of the Government’s 2010 PSA target. English Nature uses five categories to assess the condition of SSSIs. These categories (described in the national Target 2010 report) are

shown in Figure 4, which also compares the current regional and national positions. For the purposes of this report, however, we concentrate on the two main categories – SSSI land in target condition (made up of SSSIs in

favourable and unfavourable recovering condition) and SSSI land which is not in target condition (made up of SSSIs in unfavourable no change, unfavourable declining, part-destroyed or destroyed condition).

**Figure 4** Condition of SSSIs in the North West at 31 December 2005 (national status in brackets)



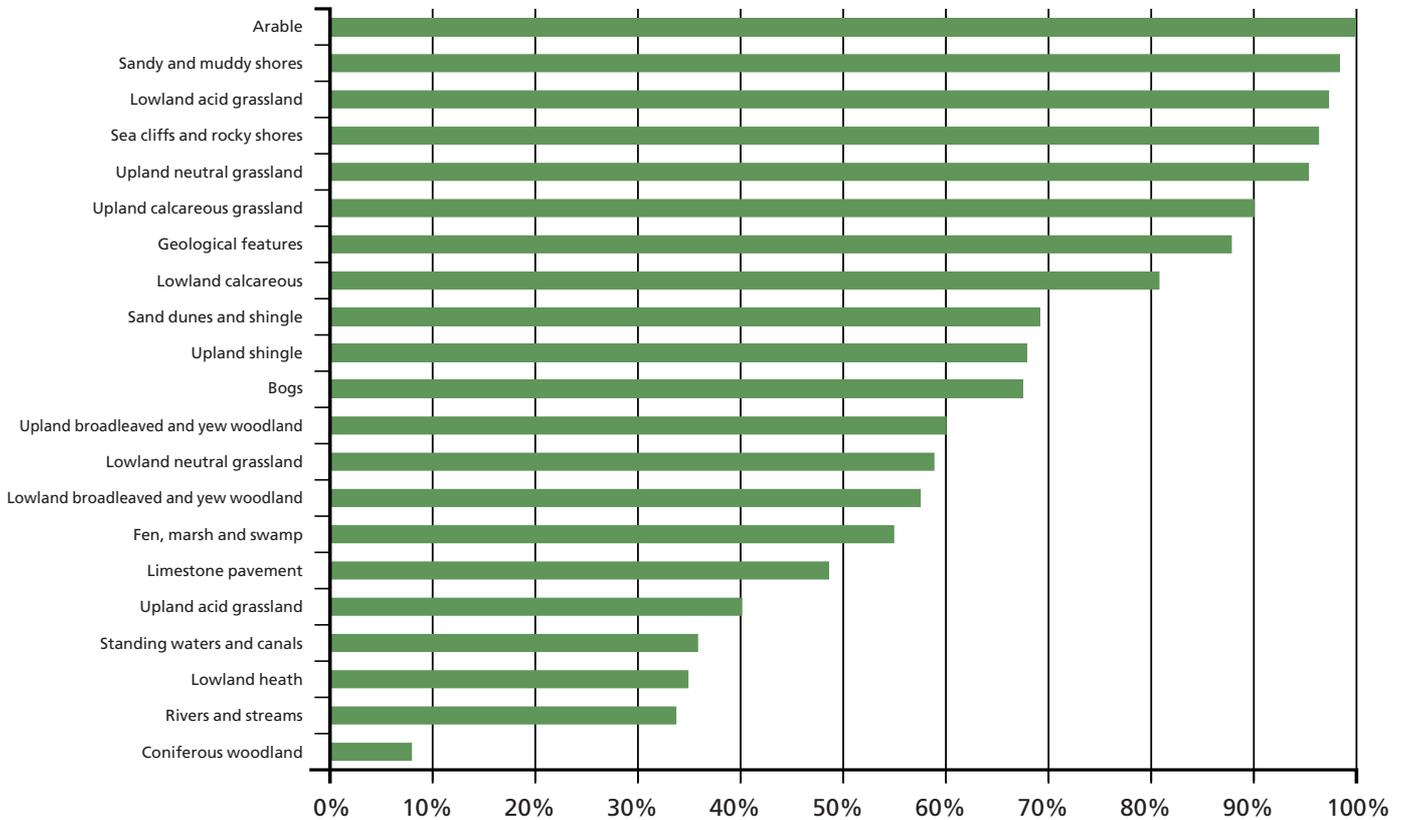


Mixed heath, Cumbria. Dan Hunt/English Nature.

## Condition of SSSI habitats in the North West

Nationally, SSSIs are broadly divided into 21 main habitat types, all of which are found in the North West region. These range from the bogs and dwarf shrub heaths of the uplands, through aquatic and lowland habitats, to geological sites and the specialised habitats of the coast. Figure 5 lists all of the main SSSI habitats found in the region and shows their condition at the end of 2005.

**Figure 5 SSSI habitats in the North West (percentage in target condition)**

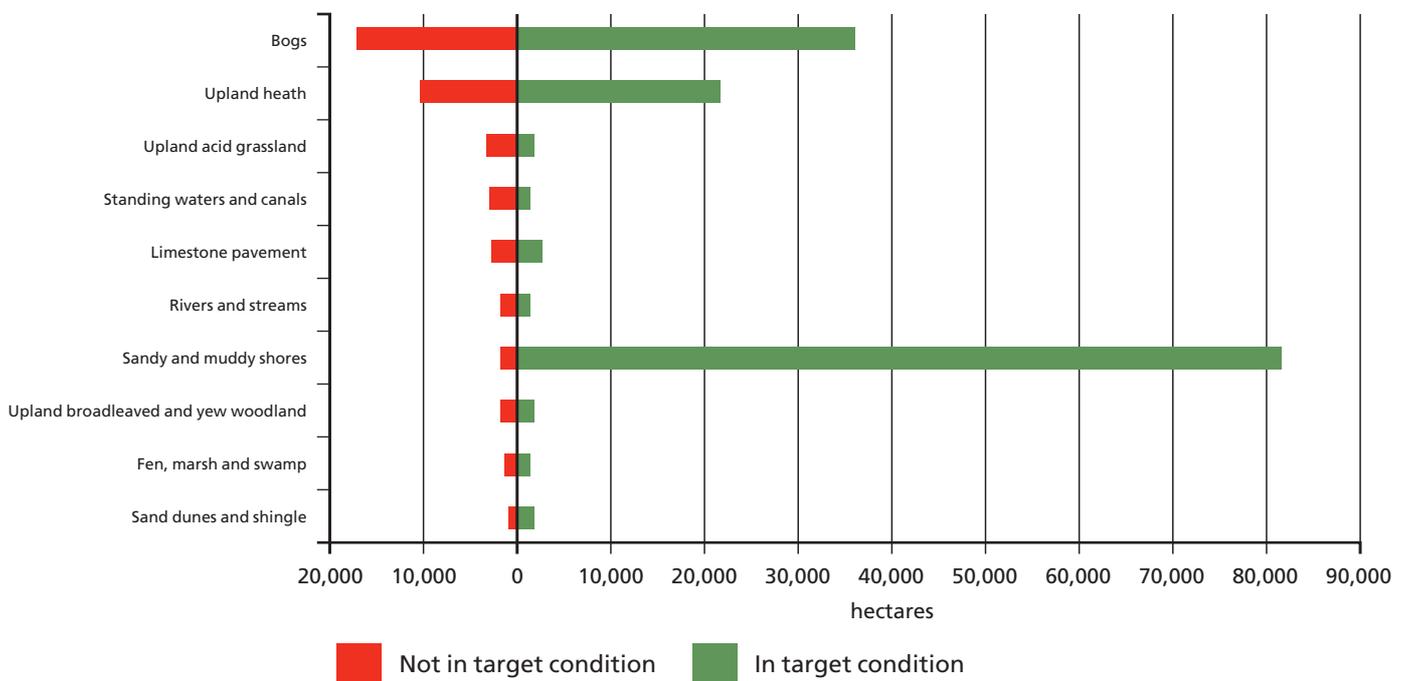


As Figure 6 shows, the area of each SSSI habitat varies widely. Inevitably there has been a sharper focus on those habitats which cover the largest areas of land, where the greatest contribution to the 2010 target can be made. Of the 43,000 hectares of SSSI land still not reaching target condition in the North West,

more than 27,000 hectares can be accounted for by just two habitats – upland heath and bogs. In the North West, much work has already been done on upland SSSIs and indeed, this is where the biggest recent successes have been. However, we must still work towards achieving target condition on other habitats, in

particular the region’s internationally important rivers and streams, open water and bogs. By 2010, we would want to see all habitats in the region in good condition. To implement effective management on these habitats presents a difficult challenge, and will need the co-operation of many partner organisations.

**Figure 6 SSSI habitats in the North West - top ten in order of greatest area that is not in target condition**



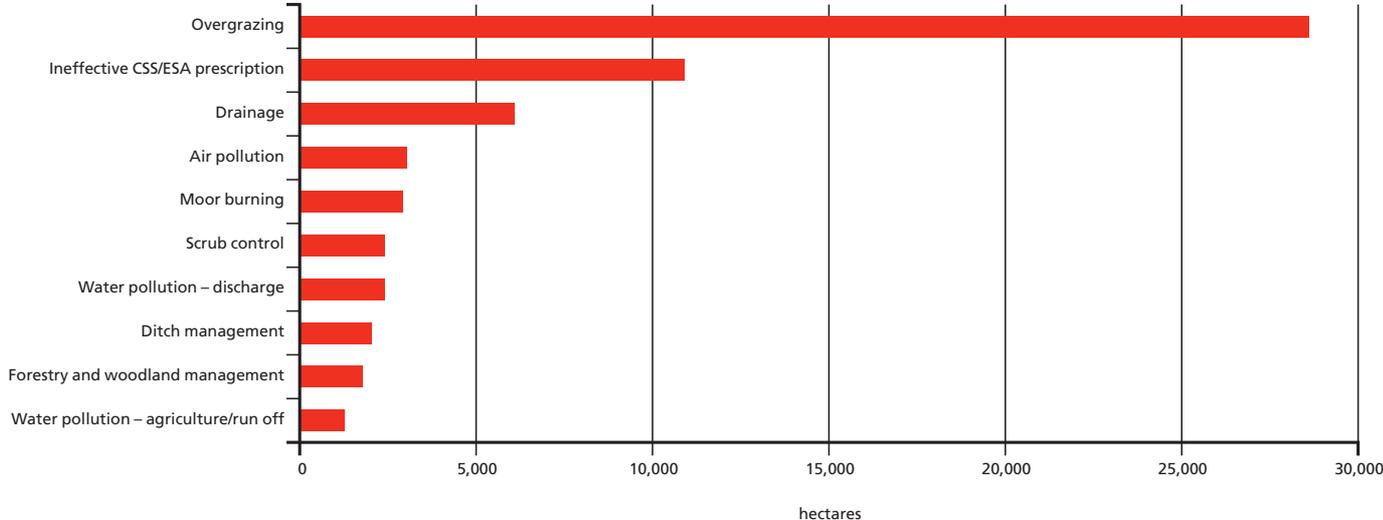


Overgrazing at Crosby-Ravensworth Fell SSSI, Cumbria. Dan Hunt/English Nature

# Why some habitats in the North West are not in target condition

The main reasons why some SSSI land is not in target condition are well understood, as are the type of habitats on which they impact. Nationally English Nature has identified 42 different causes, a comprehensive description of which is provided in an earlier publication (*England’s best wildlife and geological sites – The condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest in England in 2003 – English Nature, 2003*). Figure 7 shows the main causes for the North West by area.

**Figure 7** Why SSSIs in the North West are not in target condition



The top four groups of sites where significant issues are still to be resolved are uplands, freshwater, lowland and maritime SSSIs.

## Uplands<sup>1</sup>

**Habitats include: montane habitats, upland heathland, upland acid grassland, upland calcareous grassland, blanket bogs, and upland woodland.**

Wildlife in the uplands is intimately linked to livestock farming systems and, where

there is extensive heather, with management for grouse. Maintaining wildlife interests depends on sensitive management, especially appropriate stock levels of sheep and cattle, and practices such as burning.

Overgrazing is a widespread problem for upland habitats, affecting 28,500 hectares of SSSIs in the North West – particularly the Lake District High Fells and North Pennines. Many upland SSSIs are registered common land, the complex management structures

of which make addressing overgrazing on these more difficult. Grouse moor management, particularly burning, if too intensive and too frequent, can adversely affect sensitive habitats such as blanket bog. Drainage, particularly moor grips, causes direct loss of habitat. Many upland woodlands are not regenerating due to grazing pressures and contain non-native species. Public access and recreation, if unmanaged, can cause disturbance to ground nesting birds and damage to habitats.

<sup>1</sup> *State of Nature – the upland challenge* (English Nature 2001) addresses many of the issues



## Freshwater<sup>2</sup>

**Habitats include: rivers and streams and standing open waters.**

The region contains important freshwater habitats - the Cumbrian lakes, the Cheshire Meres and the major rivers of the Lake District. Water pollution from discharges and from diffuse sources such as livestock farming has an adverse effect on the characteristic wildlife of lakes and rivers. Considerable progress has been made in recent years in reducing the polluting load from sewage works. We are now beginning to tackle diffuse sources of nutrients through the Government's Catchment Sensitive Farming programme and a pilot partnership project aimed to protect Derwentwater and Bassenthwaite Lake. Cumbria supplies water to major conurbations such as Greater Manchester. Lower seasonal rainfall in some years makes the lakes and rivers more vulnerable to water abstraction, and we have been involved in the process of setting Drought Orders on the River Eden SSSI. Another emerging issue, which is proving difficult to tackle, is the spread of non-native species such as Japanese knotweed, Australian swamp stonecrop and signal crayfish. Intensive control programmes can be successful and need to be instituted more widely in lakes, rivers and drainage channels. Recent flood disasters in Carlisle and elsewhere have highlighted the need for sustainable flood management. We are initiating

fluvial audits on our river SSSIs in collaboration with the Environment Agency to identify sources of sediment and historical channel modifications which can be addressed through river restoration programmes, starting on the River Kent SSSI. Increased run-off after rainfall can be caused by moor gripping and frequent burning of heather. These practices are also damaging wildlife habitat (see above). It is important to consider catchment management from the uplands right through to the sea.

## Lowland<sup>2</sup>

**Habitats include: fen, marsh and swamp, bogs, woodland, acid, calcareous and neutral grasslands, and lowland heath.**

The condition of lowland SSSIs is often closely linked to neighbouring agricultural activity, as well as residential, industrial and recreational pressures. Over half the region's population lives in the Mersey belt, between Liverpool and Manchester, resulting in greater and more frequent impacts on wildlife. Drainage has adversely affected the condition of lowland raised mires. The drying out of sites has led to colonisation by scrub and trees and there are still some extant planning permissions for peat extraction from these fragile habitats. Basin fens are particularly vulnerable to water-borne pollution. Where peat extraction has stopped, restoration work is needed to achieve target condition, such as that taking place at Winmarleigh

Moss to raise water levels and remove scrub. High deer populations are hindering natural regeneration in some of the regions lowland woodlands. Conversely many grassland and heathland habitats need more grazing. The establishment of invasive non-native species is another problem for lowland sites.

## Maritime<sup>3</sup>

**Habitats include: cliffs, sand dunes and beaches, mudflats, salt marsh, and geology.**

Coastal SSSIs are affected by a range of complex factors, including industry, ports and sea defences. Integrated management and co-operation is essential to minimise impacts and achieve sustainable management across these large sites. Management schemes are already operating for the European Marine Sites in the region and, ideally, such initiatives would be highly desirable for the coast as a whole. The impacts of climate change on sea levels present an additional challenge. Land management planning must anticipate and compensate for potential changes in the future. Industrial discharges and dredging affect major estuaries, particularly the Dee and the Mersey. These require monitoring and control, through statutory and voluntary approaches. Fishing for cockles and mussels takes place across the North West estuaries. Appropriate regulation is needed to maintain stable fisheries and the international populations of wading birds.

<sup>2</sup> *State of Nature. Lowlands – future landscapes for wildlife* (English Nature 2004)

<sup>3</sup> *State of Nature: Maritime – getting onto an even keel* (English Nature, 2002) addresses many of the issues

# The road to 2010

At the end of 2005, we know that 78.8 per cent of the North West region's SSSIs are in target condition. We also have a good understanding of the reasons why the remaining 21.2 per cent are not. Over the next five years the challenge is to ensure that this remaining area meets the 2010 target, and that SSSIs already in target condition stay that way. To achieve this, we need to be absolutely clear about what needs to be done, and by whom.

To tackle this critical step, English Nature established a Remedies Project in 2004 which has drawn together detailed information on every SSSI in the region. Each SSSI may be sub-divided into separate units, depending not in target condition, the project:

- defines the action needed to be taken to address these causes;
- details the mechanisms to enable the necessary actions to be carried out;
- identifies the organisations and individuals best placed to implement those actions and mechanism; and
- enables and secures the agreement of land managers to ensure the actions are carried through.

Figure 8 lists the five most important remedies identified for the North West, in terms of the area of SSSI that can be brought into target condition.

**Figure 8** Remedies for bringing SSSIs into target condition in the North West - the top five (by area)

Remedy	Organisations who can help deliver the remedy	SSSI habitats that will benefit most from the remedy	Area of SSSI that would benefit from the remedy (ha)
New Environmental Stewardship – Higher Level Schemes	Defra Rural Development Service	Upland heath	15,384
New/renew management	English Nature	Bogs	12,600
Tenancy negotiations	Voluntary Conservation Organisation, Local Authorities	Upland heath	2,294
Direct management	English Nature, Forestry Commission, National Parks	Bogs, upland heath, standing waters and canals	4,103
Review of discharge/pollution, prevention and control consents	Environment Agency	Standing waters and canals, bogs	3,515



## Remedies in action

In the last few years, the hard work of our partners on some major projects and initiatives has resulted in SSSI land moving into target condition in the North West.

- Resolving overgrazing issues in the uplands through use of Sheep Wildlife Enhancement Schemes, agri-environment schemes, and more effective management by organisations such as MoD, RSPB and United Utilities in the Lake District Fells, Pennines and Bowland Fells.
- Progress on large peatland sites through partnership working in the Peatlands for People project.
- Improving water quality, and tackling other wetland issues through the Environment Agency's review of consents.
- Resolving complicated fisheries issues on the Dee Estuary and Morecambe Bay.
- Additional resources from the Forestry Commission to achieve the target condition on woodland SSSI over the next two years.

We are also working closely with the Rural Development Service and Forestry Commission to identify areas of SSSI that are appropriate for entry into the Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme and England Woodland Grant Scheme.

# Working together

**Figure 9** Major landowners and the condition of their SSSIs in the North West at the end of 2005

Organisation	Total area (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (%)
Crown Estate Marine	77,116	74,554	97%
Local Authorities	35,530	24,305	68%
National Trust	14,107	6,977	49%
RSPB	11,484	11,069	96%
English Nature	11,086	10,539	95%
United Utilities	9,053	8,258	91%
National Parks	6,789	5,730	84%
MoD	6,426	3,277	51%
Wildlife Trusts	5,030	4,768	95%
Forest Enterprise	2,800	1,136	41%
Ports and Harbours Authorities	1,492	1,477	99%

As is clear from the preceding examples, an enormous amount of credit is due to the partner organisations and individuals whose efforts helped achieve the significant advance towards the 2010 target in the last two years. Without such close partnership working, we would be some way behind the current position. The continuation of this approach is essential if the target is to be achieved.

Of all the partners that English Nature works with in the North

West, a small number manage large areas of SSSIs. These partners are described as the Major Landowners Group and they have a particularly critical role to play in adopting remedies and bringing SSSIs into target. Figure 9, provides a summary of the area and condition of SSSI holdings for the major landowners in the region at the end of 2005.

This table shows the areas of land owned by each body. It does not necessarily reflect that they are responsible for an SSSI not being

in target condition. In many cases, there will be one or more reasons why the named landowner is not in a position to do anything about an SSSI not meeting target condition. At the time of going to press, English Nature is working to reach final agreement with our partners to identify, in such situations, which organisation is responsible for taking action. In the near future, we will be able to show the area of SSSI holding for which the individual landholder has agreed responsibility.

# Why the PSA target is so important

The protection of SSSIs has long been considered essential to the conservation of England's wildlife habitats and natural features, but there is an increasing awareness of the wider value of these special sites, and their context in the wider environment and landscape. Firstly, by protecting particular sites and habitats, many wider-ranging species, rare or otherwise, are conserved. Secondly, SSSIs perform many important 'ecosystem services' such as upland moorlands that provide our water, saltmarshes that protect our coasts from rising seas, and natural floodplains that buffer towns from flooding. Last but not least, SSSIs create social wealth, by offering people the simple enjoyment of a quiet walk in the countryside, and economic wealth through the opportunities they provide for local and regional ecotourism.

Achieving the PSA target will ensure that these benefits can be secured for future generations. It is clear that the biggest challenge ahead is to ensure that there is a continuing partnership approach, with truly co-ordinated action by key stakeholders, and to use these partnerships to manage SSSIs in the wider context, to improve our Biodiversity Action Plan habitats and the wider natural environment. Despite the difficulties ahead, English Nature

firmly believes the target is both realistic and achievable. However this is only possible if everyone co-operates and adequate resources are dedicated to addressing the outstanding issues.

The responsibility for overseeing this process passes from English Nature to *Natural England* later this year. The creation of the new organisation has already begun, with English Nature, the Landscape, Access and Recreation

elements of the Countryside Agency, and the environment activities of Defra's Rural Development Service working together as partners. Since April 2005, this natural partnership has been working together to deliver joint outcomes and pave the way for *Natural England* whilst continuing the separate and respective statutory duties of each body. Achieving the 2010 PSA target will remain a vital area of work for the new organisation.





English Nature, the Rural Development Service and the Countryside Agency. Working in partnership to conserve and enhance our landscapes and natural environment, to promote countryside access and recreation as well as public well-being, now and for future generations.

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Peter Wakely/English Nature 11,830  
Bottom left: Morecambe Bay SSSI, Lancashire.  
Peter Wakely/English Nature 9,718  
Main: Hart's-tongue fern on limestone pavement, Gait Barrows  
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