

Environmental Stewardship

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Somerset farmer celebrates 25 years of environmentally friendly farming

2012 marks the silver jubilee of England's agri-environment schemes

Orchids, snipe and 26 acres of traditional orchard have thrived on a farm on the Somerset Levels and Moors thanks to 25 years of the landmark schemes that have been encouraging environmentally friendly farming practices.

Agri-environment schemes now operate across the country, with nearly 52,000 farmers in England now signed up. David Banwell was one of the first farmers in the country to sign up to the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) Scheme in 1987, which paid farmers to safeguard and enhance areas of landscape, biodiversity and cultural importance.

Mr Banwell and his brother John have 36 hectares of permanent grassland on Tadham and Tealham Moors Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The area has been designated a SSSI because of its peat moors with outstanding freshwater insects and flowers and for its importance for wetland birds. He runs 300 Friesian steers on the grassland and also has 26 acres of orchard for cider apples. In all, the farm covers over 140 hectares.

Mr Banwell is most proud of the increase in the numbers of breeding waders on his farm: "One of the great things about being in an agreement is that you get to understand how farming and nature work together. Farming actually creates breeding habitats. I learned that by grazing cattle, the land gets churned up which in turn means the flies and insects are exposed which then attracts birds. Even with this bad weather we've still got snipe on our land. I know, because I regularly see them!"

He is also very pleased with the number of orchids growing on the moors: "We used to have a few which I thought was nice, now we have about 1,000. I can only think it is due to the raised water levels" said Mr Banwell.

The first ESAs were launched in five areas: The Broads, Pennine Dales, South Downs, Somerset Levels and Moors and West Penwith. This was a new and bold way of providing practical support to land managers to retain and protect valuable and threatened landscape, wildlife and archaeology, which might otherwise have been lost to intensification. Conserving hedgerows and field margins, reducing fertiliser use and supporting extensive grazing were among the early priorities of the ESA schemes. From the experiences learnt in the early ESAs came the development of more targeted schemes and agreements to conserve and enhance the countryside, which have helped to bring about and respond to environmental changes.

Farming Minister David Heath said: "Farmers and land managers are the guardians of England's iconic landscapes. Over the past 25 years agri-environment schemes have played a key role in enabling them and environmental organisations to improve the countryside and look after our wildlife".

In the Somerset Levels and Moors, the first tranche of ESAs were developed to protect the grazing marsh. Much of this land is now moving into the successor scheme Environmental Stewardship (ES) with the opportunity to recreate valuable biodiversity habitats.

David Leach, Somerset Wildlife Trust's Brue Valley Living Landscape Project Manager commented: "Agri-environment schemes like the Somerset Levels and Moors Environmentally Sensitive Area, managed by the government body Natural England, have been the single most important tool for nature conservation over the past 25 years. We should celebrate their past success and ensure that they continue to provide benefits for society into the future."

Mr Banwell said the biggest change in 25 years is the flexibility of the agreements: "When I first went into an ESA they were very strict only allowing one animal per every two acres. This didn't work and I ended up mowing the grass instead of grazing it. Due to lack of grazing we also had a problem with marsh ragwort and hemlock water dropwort which is poisonous to cattle. However, over time the agreement options were relaxed and it became more flexible. The steady income and the fact that we could farm in a less intensive way were part of the reason we joined the scheme. The scheme limits the amount of stock we can graze on the moors, which is better for the animals. We also cut rushes for bedding which means we haven't had to buy straw for 20 years."

Steve Portch is Mr Banwell's Natural England adviser. He said: "The Somerset Levels and Moors constitute the largest lowland grazing marsh in Britain, covering an area approximately twice the size of Bristol. The low-lying, generally wet and open grassland landscape supports a variety of aquatic plants, insects and a wide range of wading birds such as snipe and lapwing which breed in the area each year. The area is also internationally famous for its archaeology and history, with many prehistoric wooden trackways that have been preserved for millennia in the waterlogged ground."

Mark Robins of the RSPB, said: "Twenty five years ago wildlife on the Somerset Levels was under real threat. The introduction of the Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme changed that. It was innovative and for the first time established the principle that environmentally friendly farming could be funded publicly. Since its inception, the scheme has proved very popular with farmers on the Levels. The RSPB now looks forward to the next twenty five years and to building on the principles established through ESA. The Somerset Levels is a special place and deserves this."

There are currently 528 live ESA and ES agreements on the Somerset Levels and Moors committing nearly £3 million annually and covering more than 21,000 hectares of land, the equivalent of 35,000 football pitches.