

Target 2010 – North East

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



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

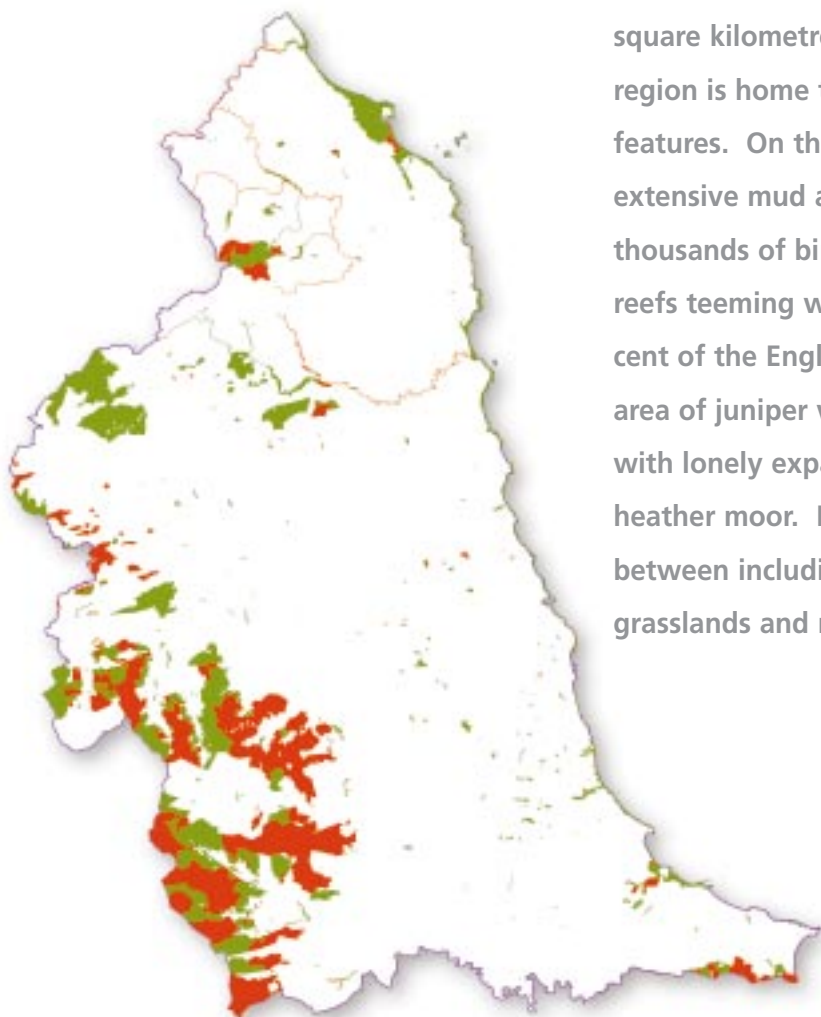


Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are the very best wildlife and geological sites in England. The Government has signed a Public Service Agreement (PSA) to ensure that, by area, 95 per cent of these sites are in the best possible condition (target condition) by 2010.

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 East 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 for SSSIs, and what is meant by target condition.

The North East picture

Figure 1 Distribution and condition of SSSI units in the North East

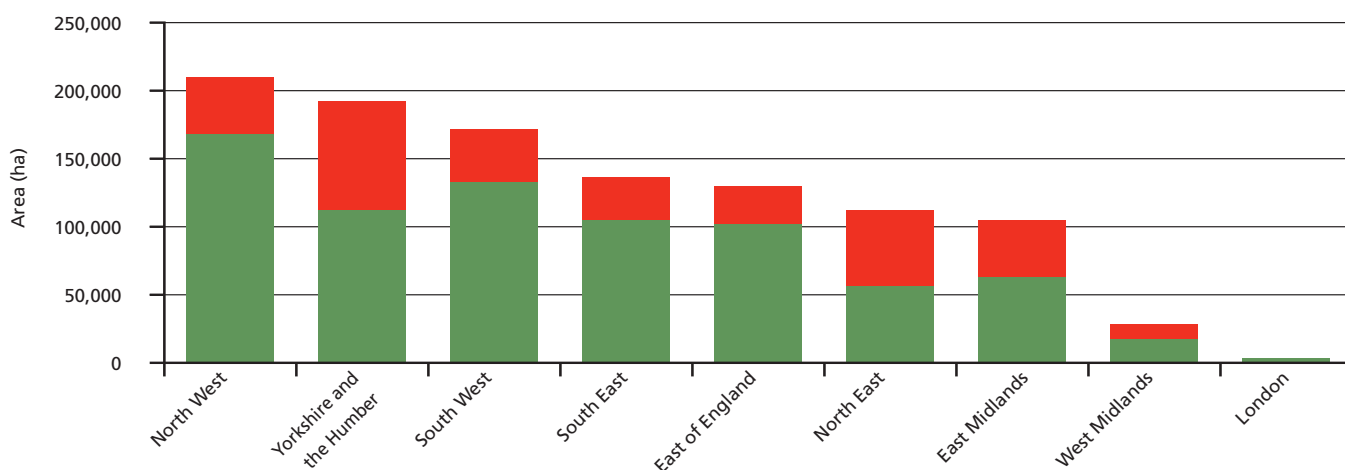


■ In target condition
 ■ Not in target condition

The North East Region, often referred to as Northumbria, comprises County Durham, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, and Tees Valley. It is the smallest of the English regions outside of London, covering an area of 8,452 square kilometres, and is also the least populated. The region is home to a wealth of wildlife and geological features. On the coast, there are miles of sand dunes and extensive mud and sand flats providing havens for thousands of birds. Out to sea are islands and underwater reefs teeming with marine life. In the uplands, over 80 per cent of the English black grouse population and the largest area of juniper wood in England can be found, together with lonely expanses of internationally important bog and heather moor. Many ancient irreplaceable habitats lie in between including mountain hay meadows, limestone grasslands and rivers of immense value to wildlife.

There are 250 SSSIs in the region covering over 108,000 hectares – around 10 per cent of all SSSI land in England. This is a significant proportion of the national total, explained in part by the extensive areas of upland and coastal habitat in the region. Of the nine English regions, the North East contains the second largest area of SSSI land not in target condition (Figure 2). However, with 50.7 per cent it has the lowest percentage of SSSI land in target condition.

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



Progress towards the 2010 target

Despite its comparatively lowly starting point, the last two years have seen excellent progress towards the 2010 target in the North East. In September 2003, 42 per cent of SSSI land in the region was in target condition - a figure that, as of 31 December 2005, has risen to 50.7 per cent (Figure 3). While this is still some way behind the national figure of 69.8 per cent, it is a very creditable achievement and means that over 8,000 hectares of SSSI have been brought into target condition during this period. This reflects the hard work of landowners, managers and organisations able to fund and deliver the necessary work, and often involves many years of careful land stewardship and management. However, with more than 53,000 hectares of SSSI still not achieving target condition, it also clearly highlights the huge effort required between now and 2010 if the PSA target is to be achieved.



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

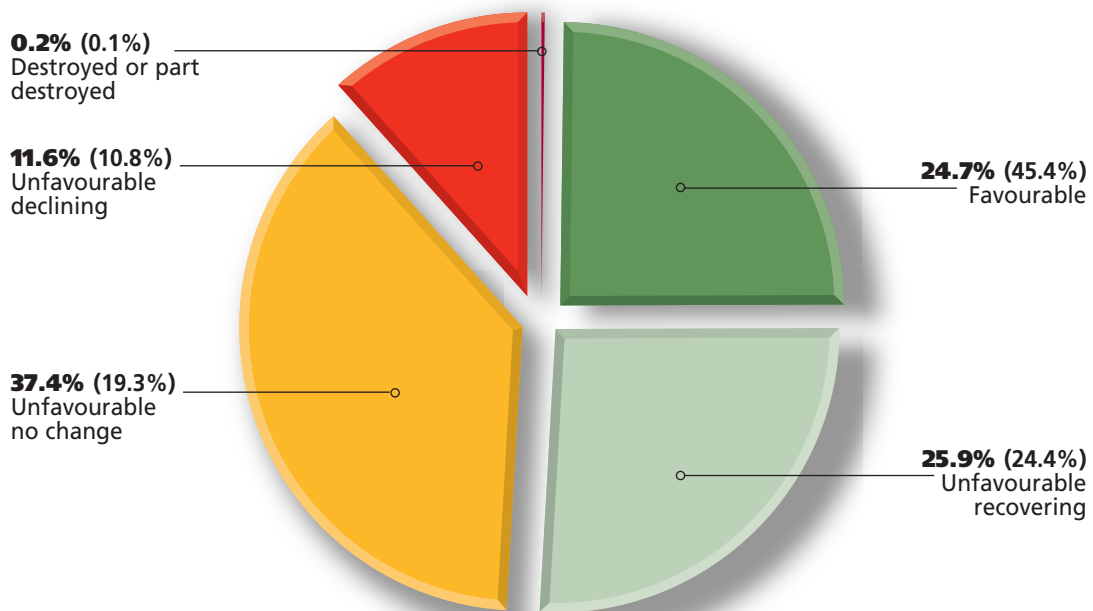
	In target condition		Not in target condition	
	%	Area (ha)	%	Area (ha)
September 2003	41.9	46,024	58.1	63,867
December 2005	50.7	54,773	49.3	53,299

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

report) are shown in Figure 4 which also compares the current regional and national position. 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 East at 31 December 2005 (national status in brackets)



Puffin, Farne Islands SSSI, Northumberland. Paul Glendell/English Nature 24,691

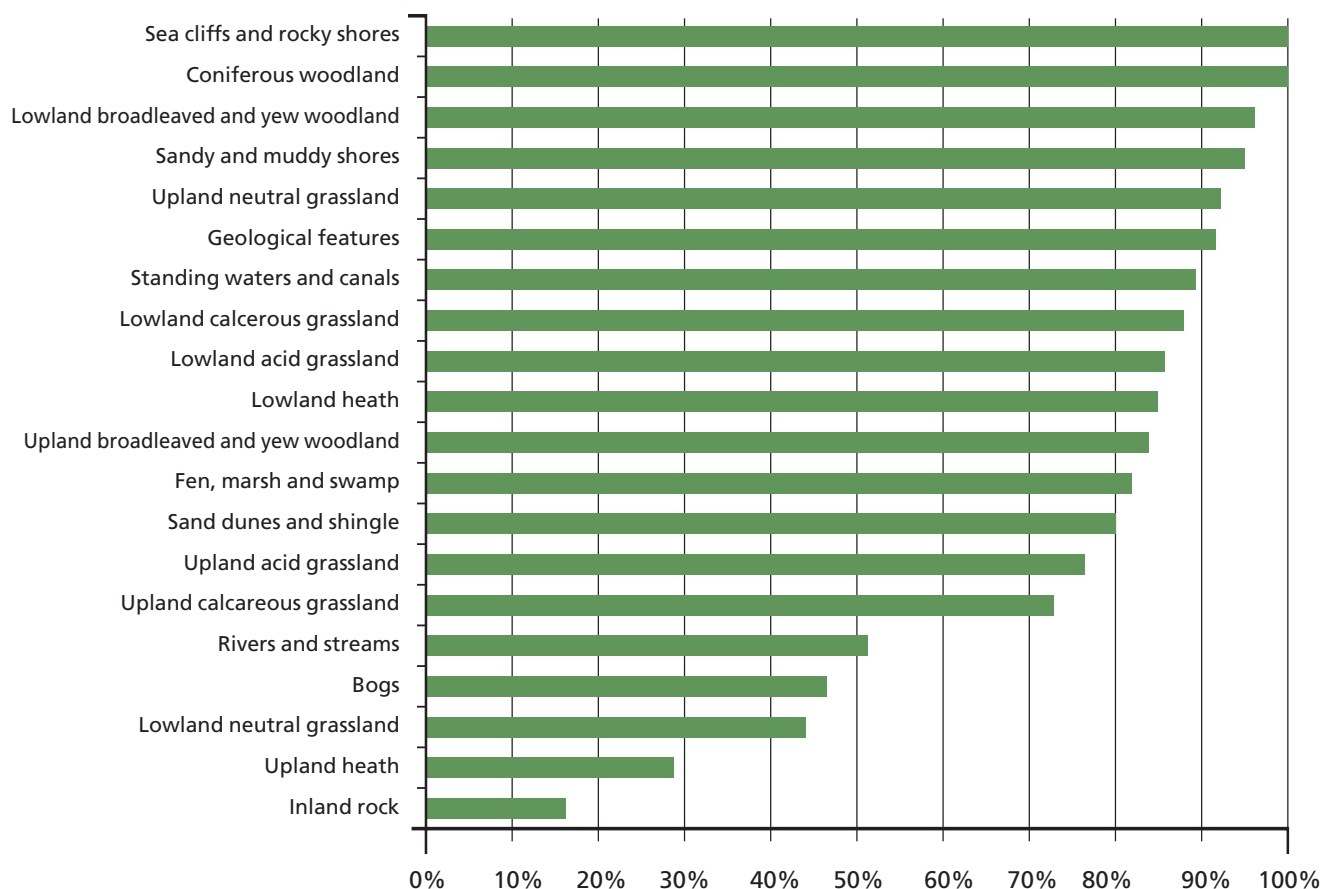


Reed flowers, Newham Fen SSSI, Northumberland.
Paul Glendell/English Nature 25, 183

Condition of SSSI habitats in the North East

Nationally, SSSIs are broadly divided into 21 habitat types, all of which can be found in the North East Region. These range from the extensive bogs and moorlands of the uplands, through grassland and woodland habitats to geological sites and the specialised habitats of the coast. Figure 5 lists all the main SSSI habitats found in the region and shows their condition at the end of 2005.

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

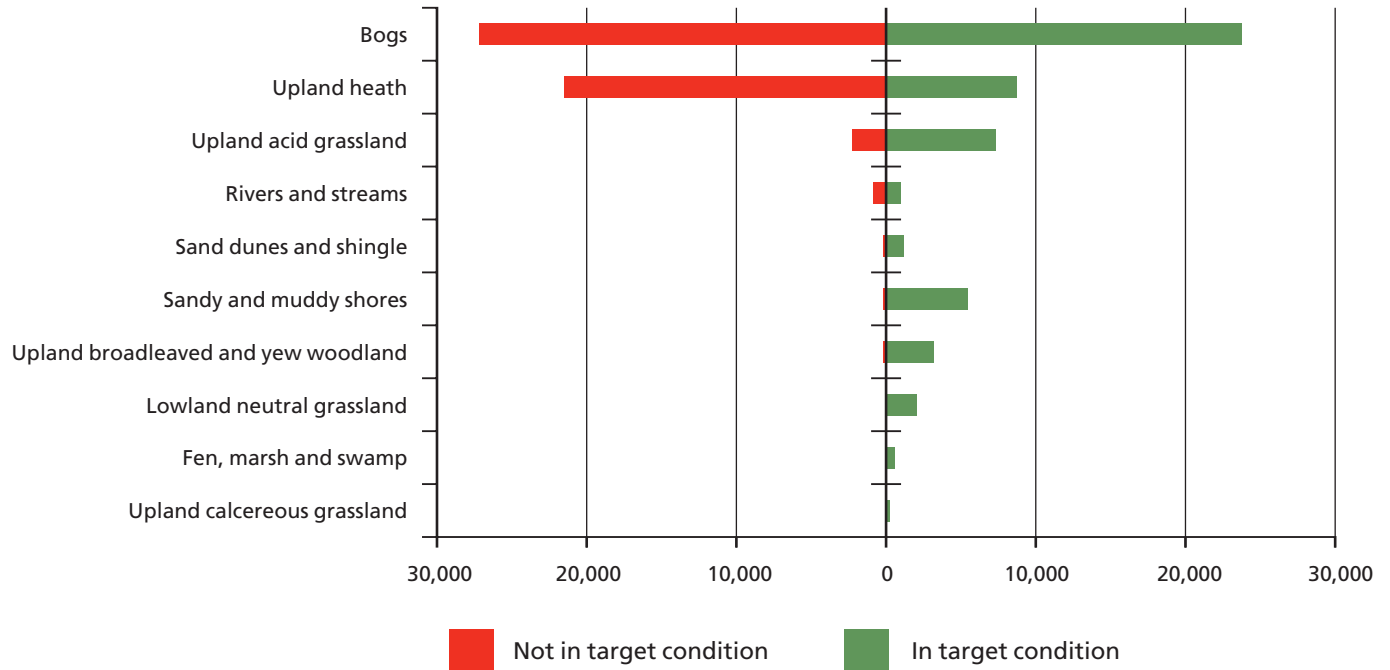


As Figure 6 shows, the area of each SSSI habitat varies widely and, inevitably, a sharper focus is brought to those habitats with the largest areas of land not in target condition. In the North East, prioritising efforts on the upland

habitats can make the greatest contribution to the 2010 target. Of the 53,000 hectares of SSSI land still not reaching target condition in the region, over 48,000 hectares can be accounted for by just two habitats – bogs and upland heaths.

The fact that these two habitats appear in the region’s bottom four in terms of target condition percentage emphasises the challenge ahead. However, we would want to see all habitats in good condition including bogs and upland heaths.

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

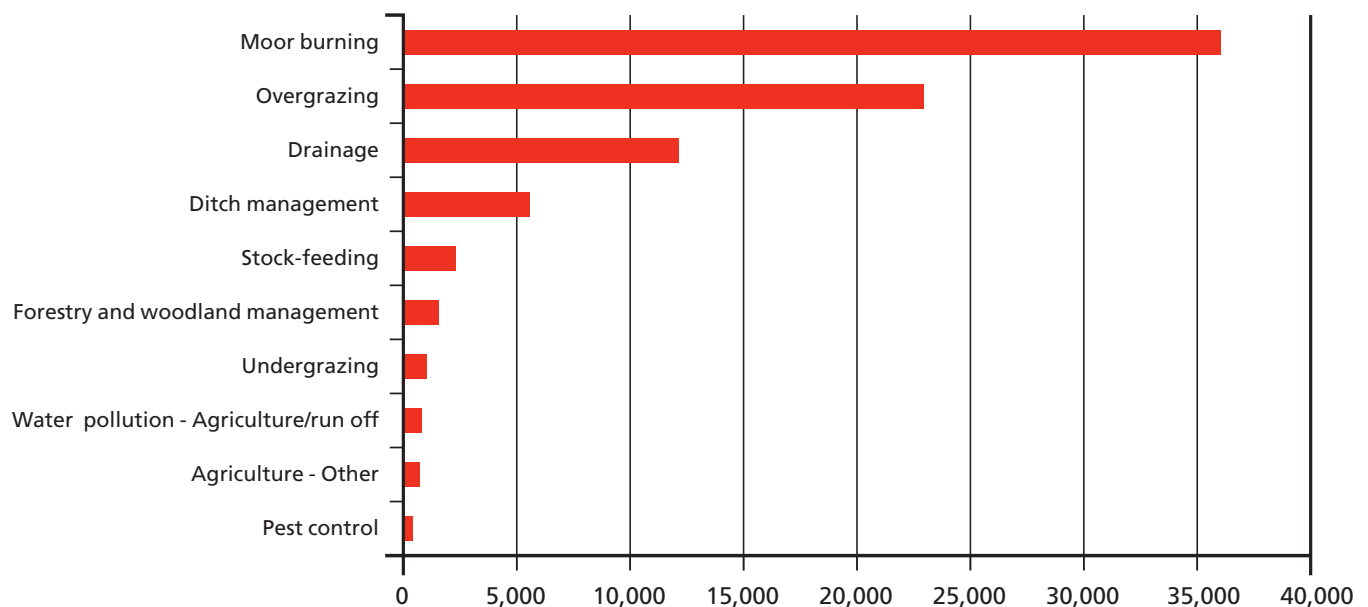


Hay meadow, Upper Teesdale SSSI, Durham. Peter Wakely/English Nature 13,388

Why some habitats in the North East 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 East.

Figure 7 Why SSSIs in the North East are not in target condition



In many cases, a single SSSI will be affected by a range of factors that prevent it from being in target condition. For example, many upland SSSIs are affected by overgrazing, moor burning and drainage (and other causes). In such situations, each cause must be tackled and resolved or else the site will not be in target condition – again underlining the huge challenge of bringing upland sites into target condition.

Moor burning – 36,000 hectares

Managing upland habitats by burning has been practised for centuries. Done well, it can be very positive, creating ideal conditions for the animals and plants that rely on heathland. However, inappropriate management where fires are too hot or frequent can be very

damaging, eliminating sensitive species, and accelerating the erosion of soil which leads to increased run-off into water courses. A new moorland management plan template has recently been devised, with support from the Moorland Association, which will facilitate the production of burning plans for grouse moors. This should go some way to addressing this problem – currently the biggest cause of not being in target condition in the North East.

Overgrazing – 23,000 hectares

Grazing by too many sheep can quickly turn moorland from heath into species-poor grassland. Overgrazing also leads to soil erosion and can affect water quality as run-off increases, causing higher river flows and

siltation. Nationally, this is the single biggest problem affecting upland SSSIs, and one that also occurs in bog, limestone grassland and woodland habitats. The success of the Sheep Wildlife Enhancement Scheme over the last two years has helped reduce the magnitude of this issue and the introduction of the Higher Level option of Environmental Stewardship will be a significant tool in continuing to address the problem. However, overgrazing remains the second biggest reason for SSSIs not being in target condition.

Moorland drainage and ditch management – 17,600 hectares

Drainage is a significant cause of upland SSSIs not being in target conditions, particularly in combination with overgrazing and

unsuitable burning regimes. It causes direct loss of habitat and soils, with indirect impacts on water quality and sediment loadings in rivers. Peatlands have an important role to play in buffering against climate change. Draining them reduces their ability to absorb carbon. The blocking of drains remains a priority in order to prevent further damage to these precious upland habitats.

Forestry and woodland management – 1,600 hectares

A major cause of poor condition on SSSIs in the North East is the seeding of conifers onto important

wildlife habitats, particularly bogs in the Border Mires SSSI where other aspects of management for forestry, including drainage, have also had an impact. Forest Enterprise is currently developing a major project to address these issues as part of a long-term management plan to deliver target condition. Elsewhere, deer and sheep grazing are affecting the successful regeneration of many upland broadleaf woodlands.

Undergrazing – 1,100 hectares

In the lowlands, many SSSIs are small and scattered and their management is often disassociated

from farming or other core business objectives on the landholding. Many grassland sites are situated within a landscape dominated by arable farming or urban fringe development and in complete contrast to upland sites, it is a major challenge to find stock for appropriate grazing schemes. In these situations, more intensive labour management such as scrub control, mowing or cutting may have to replace the ideal grazing regimes. This is an important constraint in the North East in relation to improving the condition of lowland calcareous and neutral grassland.

The county picture

Just as there are obvious differences in the issues and problems facing the North East compared to the other English regions, there are differences within the region. For each area in the North East the key causes for SSSI land not being in target condition can be summarised as follows:

- **Northumberland (63% in target condition)**
Burning overgrazing and drainage on upland sites; conifer regeneration on bogs; diffuse pollution, undergrazing and lack of scrub control in the lowlands and nutrient enrichment on coastal sites.
- **County Durham (31.3% in target condition)**
Burning, overgrazing and drainage on upland sites; undergrazing and lack of scrub control and drainage of wetland sites in the lowlands.
- **Tyne and Wear (93% in target condition)**
Undergrazing and lack of scrub control.
- **Tees Valley (48.4% in target condition)**
Coastal squeeze and nutrient enrichment on coastal sites.



Lichen, Newham Fen SSSI, Northumberland. Paul Glendell/English Nature 25,189

The road to 2010

At the end of 2005, we know that 50.7 per cent of the North East's SSSIs are in target condition. We also understand why the remaining 49.3 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 on habitat type and management of the site. For each unit not in target condition, the project:

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

Figure 8 lists the most important remedies identified in the North East – 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 East - the top five (by area)

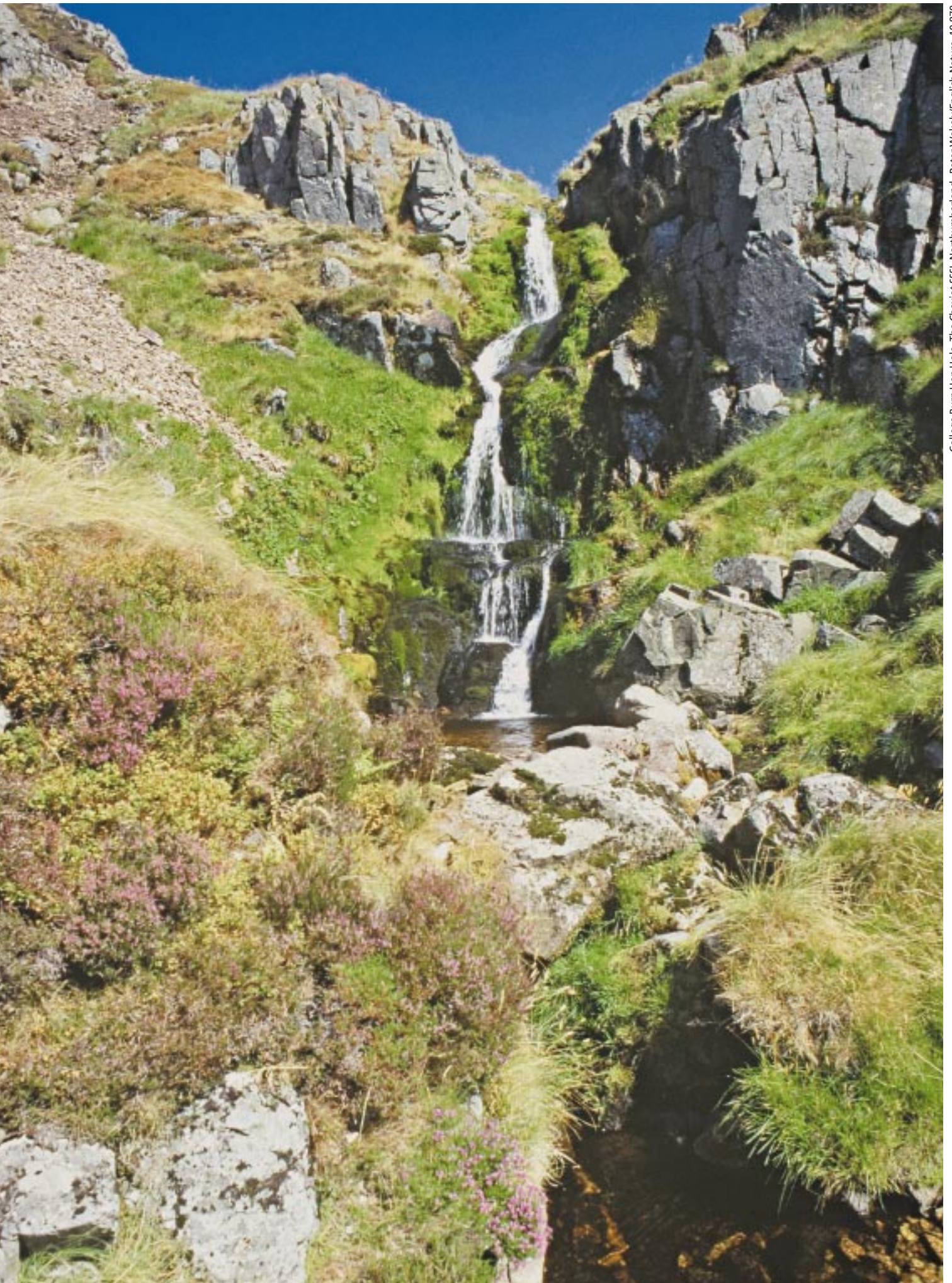
Remedy	Organisations who can help deliver the remedy	SSSI habitats that will benefit most from the remedy	Area of SSSI that would benefit from the remedy (ha)
New/renew Management Agreements	English Nature	Bogs, upland heath	36,827
New Environmental Stewardship - Higher Level Schemes	Defra Rural Development Service	Bogs, upland heath	22,445
Direct management	Forestry Commission, English Nature	Bogs	2,540
Modify existing Countryside Stewardship Schemes	Defra Rural Development Service	Bogs, upland heath	2,286
Issue of appropriate notices and consents under Section 28e of the Wildlife and countryside act	English Nature	Upland heath	1,844

Remedies in action

As can be seen above, English Nature and the Rural Development Service (RDS) share the majority of the remedies actions. The two organisations have been working closely together this year to take forward the required management on a number of sites. On Hexhamshire Common in Northumberland, a Higher Level Stewardship agreement is being developed to achieve target condition for the upland habitats in this site by addressing the three main problems of burning, overgrazing and drainage. This will bring together over 20 graziers and two grouse moor managers under a single agreement and will replace a number of Wildlife Enhancement agreements which English Nature developed with the graziers following the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease in 2001.

On the coast, English Nature has been working closely with RDS to tackle challenging issues over the management of coastal habitats.





College Burrn Hen Hole, The Cheviot SSSI, Northumberland. Peter Wakely/English Nature 19,879

Working together

An enormous amount of credit is due to the partner organisations and individuals whose efforts have led to the significant advance towards the 2010 target in the last two years. In the North East Region, the Natural Commitment process (a regional partnership of key delivery organisations) has been operating since 2003 to oversee the delivery of the 2010 target. This brings a strong strategic approach to delivering the target and a commitment from our partners to make it happen. Without such close partnership working, we would be some way behind the current position. The continuation of this approach is essential if the 2010 target is to be achieved.

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

being in 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.

Figure 9 Major landowners and the condition of their SSSIs in the North East

Organisation	Total area (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (%)
English Nature	8,272	5,339	65%
Forest Enterprise	7,194	5,086	71%
Wildlife Trusts	3,138	2,506	80%
Crown Estate	2,875	2,642	92%
National Trust	2,133	1,916	90%
Local Authorities	1,651	1,545	94%
MoD	1,493	1,462	98%

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. Firstly, by protecting particular habitats, many species, rare or otherwise, are conserved. Secondly, SSSIs perform many important 'ecosystem services' – upland moorlands that provide our water, saltmarshes that protect our coasts from rising seas, and natural floodplains that buffer towns from flash 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. 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 to deliver their separate and respective statutory duties. 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.

This is one of a range of publications published by:
External Relations Team
English Nature
Northminster House
Peterborough PE1 1UA

www.english-nature.org.uk

© English Nature 2006

Printed on Evolution Satin,
75% recycled post-consumer waste
paper, elemental chlorine free.

ISBN 1 85716 909 3

Catalogue code ST12.2

Designed and printed by
statusdesign.co.uk, 0.5M



Front cover photographs:
Top left: Allendale Moors SSSI, Northumberland.
Peter Wakely/English Nature 18,283
Middle left: Wet woodland, Roman Wall Loughs SSSI,
Northumberland. Paul Glendell/English Nature 24,514
Bottom left: Round-leaved sundew, Upper Teesdale SSSI,
Durham. Pete Stroh/Natural Treasures
Main: Guillemot colony, Farne Islands SSSI, Northumberland.
Paul Glendell/English Nature 24,638



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