



Spotlight on SSSIs

Working towards the goals of Biodiversity 2020

Issue 1 – October 2012

www.naturalengland.org.uk



Annual Statement of Progress 2011 – 2012

England is blessed by a wonderful variety of wildlife habitats and geological formations – a precious natural asset that is protected through our network of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Through this Annual Statement, Natural England aims to summarise the current conservation status of these sites. It highlights the achievements of land owners, managers and our partners in improving the condition of SSSIs while in many instances also deriving a livelihood from the site. It also explains the contribution that SSSIs are making towards the Government's conservation strategy, Biodiversity 2020.

Whether they protect flower rich meadows, rare blanket bogs, ancient woodlands or world-renowned fossil deposits, England's SSSIs are the bedrock of our national strategy for conservation. They may not be as well known to the wider public as our National Parks or our most popular nature reserves, but in achieving the ambitions of the Government's strategy to halt biodiversity loss, they are in the front line.

There are 4,121 SSSIs in England, covering around 8 per cent of the country, many of which cover the most loved, and often visited, parts of England. One of the primary roles of Natural England is to assess the condition of each site through a consistent process, according to set criteria. The results help inform our discussions with land managers as to how we can work together to protect the special interests of their site. The aim for every site is to achieve an assessment of 'favourable condition'. This means that the specific features for which a site is notified, be they a particular natural habitat, a bird species, or a unique geological formation, meet nationally agreed targets for quality or abundance.

By 2020, the Government's objective is to see that 50 per cent of the total area of SSSIs is in a favourable condition, while at least 45 per cent of the remaining area of SSSIs are in a stage of recovery and can be expected to reach favourable condition, once management plans have taken effect.

For the last operating year, (April 2011-March 2012), good progress has been made across the SSSI network. The proportion of sites in favourable condition has steadily moved forward to 37.4 per cent, an increase of 0.7 per cent from the previous year. This amounts to more than 7,000 hectares (equivalent to 1/5 of the Norfolk Broads) of our most important conservation land.

The summer programme of site assessments for 2012/13 is nearing completion, and throughout the year changes in the condition of individual sites or the entire series can be tracked on our website at: www.naturalengland.org.uk/sssi.

If you own or manage an SSSI, you are playing an important role in protecting or enhancing features that make the site special. By improving SSSI habitats you are also helping to improve your local landscape and the many benefits and basic services it provides for people – like clean water, storing carbon, and providing healthy recreation areas. I hope that over the coming year we will be able to report continued progress towards the country's goal.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maddy Jago". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Maddy Jago
Director for Landscape and Biodiversity

A favourable outlook in the forest

The New Forest is the second largest SSSI in England, covering more than 100 square miles. It supports a wealth of uncommon plants, invertebrates, fungi, birds and other wildlife. It is one of Europe's largest remaining areas of lowland heathland and has many features, including wood pasture, acid mires and acid grassland, recognised as being of international significance.

Rachel Bailey, Team Leader in Natural England says: "Assessments conducted during 2011 revealed that the area of The New Forest now considered to be in favourable condition has increased by 12 per cent." Natural England staff assessed 107 'units' of the SSSI between May and August 2011, representing around 25 per cent of The New Forest. *

Of the units surveyed almost half of the area covered, totalling 3,660 hectares, was assessed to have progressed from unfavourable recovering condition to favourable condition. This is mainly due to large scale projects being delivered by the Forestry Commission, Life and Pathfinder to remove conifer from heathland over the last ten years.

"Last year's assessments were mostly of woodland and dry heathland," says Rachel, "whilst this year the majority have been mires and humid heath. During 2012 a further 94 units have been assessed. The results of these site assessments should be with us soon and although there are early indications that the total area of SSSI in favourable condition has increased again, the gain will not be as large as last year.

* Each SSSI is sub-divided into 'units' which are areas with common landscape and habitat features or boundaries, forming practical management areas.



An Adviser undertaking a survey of mire this year

A favourable outlook in the forest (continued)

This is because these habitats have been some of those most affected by man's interventions – such as drainage – which means there is still more work to be done to restore many of these habitats to a favourable condition.”

Funding for conservation in The New Forest received a major boost in 2010, when a partnership formed of the Verderers of The New Forest, The New Forest National Park Authority, the Commoners Defence Association and the Forestry Commission, secured a ten year Higher Level Stewardship agreement. The scheme provides £1.6 million per year to secure grazing through the commoning community, wetland restoration and improvements to the historic environment.

The regeneration of these precious habitats in The New Forest will benefit a wide range of wildlife species for which the area is a haven. These include birds such as the nightjar, lapwing, Dartford warbler, hen harriers, hobby, tree pipit, redstart and stonechat. The forest is also important for a range of reptiles including adder, smooth snake, slow worms, grass snake and common lizard.

Improving the condition of these SSSI habitats is also benefitting people and the local economy. When the woodlands and wetlands of the New Forest are in a healthy condition they store and capture carbon, providing mitigation for climate change, and act as natural filters to provide clean water. They are also key parts of the distinctive landscapes that local people enjoy and that draw visitors to the National Park.

The New Forest National Park is the most visited National Park in the country with total visitor volumes estimated at 13,555,400 visitor days (excluding business tourists and personal and social visits to friends and relatives). It is estimated that £72 million is spent within The New Forest on leisure trips, which includes approximately £12.5 million generated by camping and caravanning alone. *



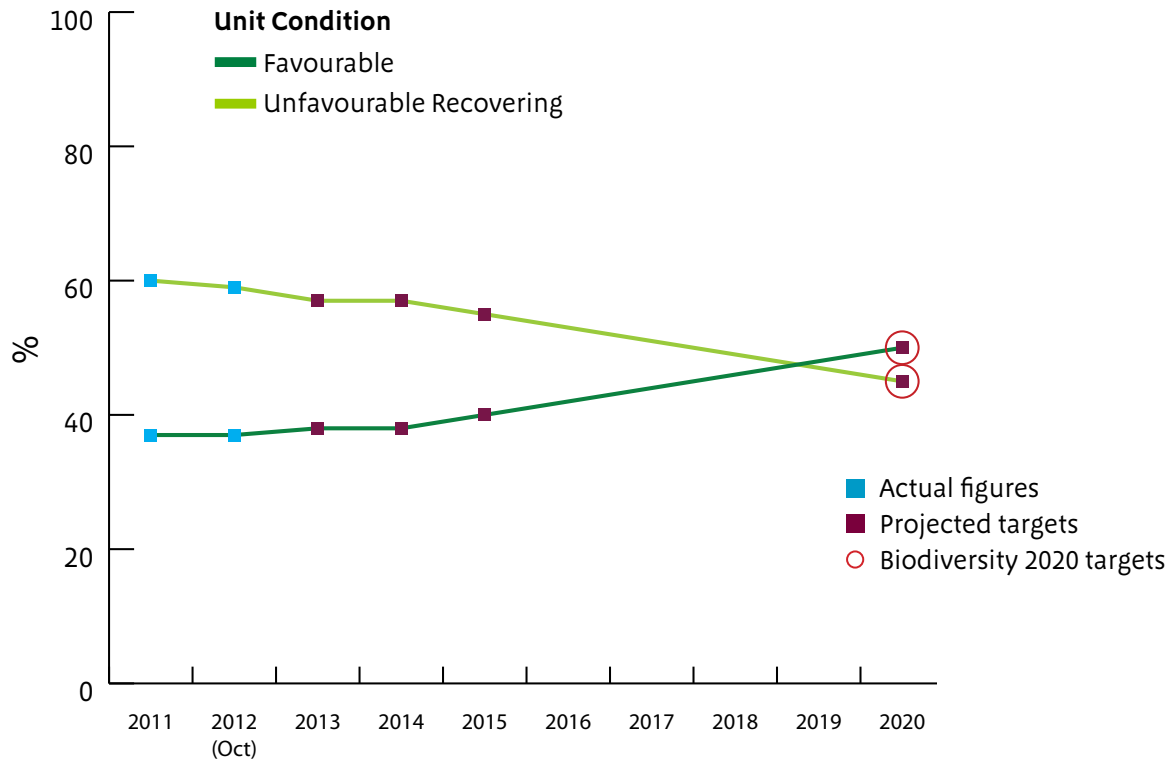
Lapwing

* This information comes from the NPA website and the facts and figures come from the result of a number of surveys carried out by Tourism South East Research Services, September 2005.

Achieving the Biodiversity 2020 Goals

Report on progress

This graph shows SSSI improvement and decline from 2011 to now and where we need to be by 2020.



The majority of all SSSIs are either in favourable condition or unfavourable recovering. When a site is assessed as unfavourable recovering it means that under current management conditions the notified features are likely to become favourable over the course of time. The time period is not specified and will vary considerably depending on the type of features or habitats.

For each site assessed in favourable or unfavourable recovering condition, threats to the condition of the site are also recorded. These are monitored to ensure that favourable condition, or progress towards it, is maintained.

Over the course of this decade, the goal of the Government's conservation strategy, Biodiversity 2020, is to see an increase in the proportion of sites in favourable condition to 50 per cent or more. The strategy also seeks to ensure that the combined measure of favourable and unfavourable recovering sites remains above 95 per cent. This will mean that over the next few years, we will be working with land owners, managers and partners to increase the area in favourable condition.

In this first edition uplands and heathlands feature quite heavily. In future editions we will cover other types of SSSI.

Summary of shift in each condition category, April 2011 – present

Condition Category	1 April 2011 (%)	1 April 2012 (%)	1 October 2012 (%)	2020 Target (%)
Favourable	36.6	37.3	37.5	50
Unfavourable recovering	59.9	59.3	59.1	45
Unfavourable no change	2.3	2.2	2.2	0
Unfavourable declining	1.1	1.2	1.2	0
Destroyed or part destroyed	0.1	0.1	Less than 0.1	0

With more than 4,000 SSSIs it is inevitable that a certain number are suffering a decline in condition or have become damaged. This may be because appropriate management has not been maintained, or due to the influence of factors such as coastal change or air pollution.

For these sites classed as unfavourable, remedies are identified that aim to address the causes of poor condition. This could include the adoption of appropriate management via the support of a Higher Level Stewardship agreement or a simple adjustment of grazing licences. During the course of this decade the area of SSSIs in declining or destroyed categories should remain below 5 per cent of the total area of sites.



Sheep grazing an upland moor – Helvellyn and Fairfield SSSI

Recent major gains (March 2011 - April 2012)

Largest areas improved to Favourable Condition		
County	Area	Hectares improved
Hampshire	The New Forest	3,823
Northumberland	Geltsdale and Glendue Fells	820
Norfolk	Halvergate Marshes	234
Cumbria	Crosby Ravensworth Fell	228
Greater Manchester	Castleton	191
Lincolnshire	The Wash	131
Somerset	Porlock Ridge and Salt Marsh	98

Forecasting future improvements

Reaching our goal of 50 per cent of SSSIs in favourable condition by 2020 requires an increase of 14 per cent from the current level, or an area of approximately 140,000 hectares. That's about the same size as the entire Peak District National Park, which gives an idea of the task ahead.

However, the rate at which a site recovers will vary depending on its characteristics. As Andrew Windrum, Natural England's SSSI Senior Adviser explains: "Grassland sites can sometimes be restored in a few years once appropriate grazing and other key management actions such as bracken control through cutting and rolling, are put in place. Woodland on the other hand, may require a generation or more to become fully re-established; as can blanket bogs which often require grip blocking to re-wet the moorland. These are vital to achieving favourable condition in many upland SSSIs."



Burning of gorse is one way of managing heathland or moorland on East Dartmoor

Using information about current site condition and trends, Natural England is working to forecast where and when improvement to favourable condition is most likely to occur. It is probable, for example, that we will see a greater proportion of lowland sites in southern England becoming favourable by 2020, while many northern SSSIs, which include large upland sites, are expected to require more time to recover.

Natural England works with a wide range of partners to help maintain progress on the condition of SSSIs. Almost 60 per cent of all SSSI land is owned or managed by government agencies and voluntary bodies, such as the Crown Estates, the Environment Agency, the RSPB and the water authorities. These organisations meet several times a year as part of the Major Land Owners Group, to agree coordinated actions to address the factors affecting site condition identified by Natural England advisers.

Boosting business and biodiversity in Exmoor

Warren Farm is a large upland farm with 865 hectares of moorland and 100 hectares of inbye (grassland). The whole farm was bought by Exmoor National Park for protection of the moorland habitat. The farm buildings and inbye were sold to Andrew Hawkins in the early 1980s and the moorland is rented to him on a 40 year lease.



Mr Hawkins harvesting heather capsules

Mr Hawkins was in an Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme (ESA) but now has an Uplands Entry Level Stewardship (UELS) agreement on his inbye and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement on his moorland for creation and restoration of moorland.

At the time of applying for ESA in 2000, the North Exmoor SSSI areas included within the agreement were noted as unfavourable, due to several factors including inappropriate burning, suboptimal grazing and the presence of excessive molinia (purple moor-grass), preventing regeneration of heather moorland.

A top-up Wildlife Enhancement Agreement offered a different way of managing the moorland.

The move into HLS allowed further work on this new approach. Mr Hawkins says "I have a genuine interest in moorland restoration. I joined HLS partly for financial reasons but also to step up action in this area. That is why I chose the 'restoration of moorland' option in my scheme."

Mr Hawkins developed a novel approach on parts of the moorland: "I cut the molinia and collect it into about 400 bales which are used for winter bedding for my cattle. This not only saves me a considerable amount of money but I believe it has resulted in increasing plant and bird diversity on what were large areas of molinia monoculture." Molinia can dominate moorland at the expense of other moorland vegetation if not carefully managed.

As a result of Mr Hawkins hard work, the SSSI is now in unfavourable recovering condition. UK Biodiversity Action Plan species skylark and reed bunting have been seen on the moorland along with regular winter visitors including hen harriers and an increase in golden plover. Marsh orchids are present on some of the grassland now and Mr Hawkins has noted an increase of bog asphodel with its striking bright yellow flowers, which thrives in well maintained purple moor-grass.



Bog asphodel

What's next?

Each year 3,100 site assessments are planned to take place and we will continue to work towards the Biodiversity 2020 target. We will also continue to work with key partners to get sites into favourable condition.

An example of this is our partnership with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) to bring large areas of chalk grassland on Salisbury Plain SSSI into favourable condition. Currently 86 per cent of the area is classed as being in Unfavourable Recovering condition. The pace of scrub removal on chalk grassland is increasing through MoD improvement works and Higher Level Stewardship agreements with tenant farmers, and recent successful juniper regeneration on Beacon Hill and Bulford Ranges is being closely watched.

Improving our service to you

We are looking to improve the overall service we provide to you, our customers:

- We recently published a handbook for SSSI owners that provides an overview of SSSIs and the main issues and procedures relating to their management. You can download a copy at: <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/1019788?category=20003>
- We also recently published the SSSI Strategic Standard.

This sets out all of our statutory duties connected with notifying, monitoring and managing SSSIs, and the principles by which we aim to implement these duties. The SSSI Strategic Standard can be viewed on our website at: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/designations/sssi/default.aspx>

- Over 200 Natural England staff members have completed a comprehensive training program on SSSI delivery to raise standards and consistency of customer service.

We want to build on this annual statement by also producing a 6 monthly e-newsletter that will update you on where we are with our targets, offer advice and tips on looking after your site and highlight some interesting work that is happening across the country.

Lastly, we would welcome feedback from you, whether it is about this statement or the service you receive from us. We are constantly looking for ways to improve our service to you and hearing your thoughts is one of the best ways of finding out whether we are getting it right or not. Please send any feedback to sssi@naturalengland.org.uk

SSSI owners/occupiers have a duty to inform us of any changes to ownership. We would like to ensure our records are up to date so that we can give you the best service possible. Please can we have the following details:

- Your name
- Name of SSSI
- Postal address
- Email address you would like correspondence sent to.



Please also let us know if you would like to receive future copies of the SSSI Annual Statement and newsletter. You can email us on sssi@naturalengland.org.uk or call 0845 600 3078.

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