

New Forest SAC Management Plan Version II

Introduction and bibliography NERR148

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Executive summary

The New Forest is one of the most important places for nature conservation in Europe—on account of its sheer size, diversity and quality of habitat. These habitats have evolved in parallel with human use over many centuries—as such there is a continuing need for them to be sensitively managed if the Forest is to remain exceptional. This requirement for management, coupled with the complexity of the site, necessitates the production of a Management Plan to which all organisations concerned with the Forest are committed, in particular those representing the local community.

The New Forest SAC, which covers some 29,000ha (hectares), supports a complex mosaic of wildlife habitats, formerly common in lowland western Europe but now rare and fragmented. The major components are the extensive wet and dry heaths, with their rich valley mires and associated wet and dry grasslands; the ancient pasture and enclosed woodlands; the network of clean rivers and streams; and frequent permanent and temporary ponds. Outstanding examples of 13 habitats of European interest are represented together with two priority habitat types, namely bog woodland and riverine woodland.

The habitats support an exceptional variety of flora and fauna. This includes the richest moss and lichen flora in lowland Europe; scarce flowering plants such as slender cotton-grass, wild gladiolus, pennyroyal and small fleabane; and an outstanding community of invertebrates dependent upon the ancient forest trees and other grazed habitats. In addition, the New Forest is a Special Protection Area (SPA) and has the largest number of Dartford warbler in Britain and internationally important populations of nightjar and woodlark. The populations of southern damselfly in boggy flushes along stream sides are of particular note, as well as great crested newt in the ponds and stag beetle associated with the abundant dead wood habitat.

The Forest's habitats and the rich diversity of species which they support, are dependent upon the management activities of the various owners and occupiers. Of fundamental importance throughout the Crown Lands and Adjacent Commons is the persistence of a pastoral economy based on the existence of Rights of Common. The commoners' stock, mainly cattle and ponies, roam freely over extensive areas of the Forest, playing a vital role in keeping open habitats free of scrub; controlling the more aggressive species such as bracken and purple moor-grass; and maintaining the richness and variety of heathland and wood pasture habitats. This is complemented by the traditional management of annual heathland burning and cutting programmes, which ensure that at any one time there is an extensive range of structurally diverse habitats available.

Update of the SAC Plan: summary of changes

The first edition of the New Forest Special Area of Conservation Management Plan (Wright and Westerhoff, 2001) was published in 2001. At the time, such a comprehensive Management Plan with the potential for far-reaching improvements for nature conservation had never been attempted. It was produced by English Nature (now Natural England) on behalf of the New Forest Life 2 Partnership programme. The first edition comprises four main sections: SAC Description (Part 1), Evaluation (Part 2), Generic Prescriptions (Part 3) and Site Management Plans for individual owners/occupiers (Part 4), outside of the Forestry Commission (now Forestry England).

The document has been the definitive foundation for guiding the management of the New Forest SAC. It describes why the Forest is so important for nature conservation, as well as how it must be managed to maintain—and where necessary, restore—the special features of interest. In doing so, it forms the rationale for legal consents issued by Natural England.

Natural England and Forestry England recognise that much has changed since the original SAC Plan was published. Many hectares of former conifer plantation have been restored to Open Forest habitats including heathland, mires and grasslands. Implementation of the Forest Design Plans have led to re-establishment of semi-natural woodlands, complementing the open Ancient and Ornamental woodlands for which the New Forest is so famous. A large sum of European and UK tax-payer money has been and continues to be invested in this vital work. For example, Higher Level Stewardship Schemes supported by Natural England, on behalf of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) as part of the Rural Development Programme for England, provides in excess of £2 million per year on top of the annual Forestry England budget to deliver conservation and restoration management in the New Forest. To date, this investment has delivered some 6,694ha of habitats into favourable condition, with many more in the pipeline, as works on the ground are completed and the inevitable time-lag between on-going maintenance and recovery takes place.

While there is still a considerable way to go in the restoration of quintessential New Forest habitats and the species they support, other issues have arisen over the years which now require consideration and action. Climate change and its impacts on the natural world is an area only briefly discussed in the original Management Plan. It has now come to the fore in both political and public thinking.

Air pollution and new tree diseases have become issues of increasing concern. These and their scope for impact on SAC habitats and species are discussed under separate headings.

Since the production of the original plan, the SAC and its surrounding lands have also been designated as a National Park. Inevitably, challenges and opportunities arise as a result, in terms of the sustainable management of recreation and public health—as well as in maintaining an ecosystem so dependent upon the de-pasturing of domestic stock by the commoning community. Therefore, it was important for Natural England and Forestry England to have commissioned the publication of a revised and updated version of the original New Forest SAC Management Plan (2001).

This new version of the New Forest SAC Management Plan is designed to be considerably more user-friendly than the first edition. It is in a digital format as opposed to paper (with the exception of the Site Management Plans for individual owners/occupiers that comprise Part 4 which remain unchanged).

While necessarily touching on the impacts of recreational activities, the SAC Management Plan is not a recreation plan and does not seek to manage recreational activities. That is the role of the Recreation Management Strategy 2010-2030 (RMS). The Strategy seeks to guide and influence recreation and spatial planning policy and implementation across the whole of the National Park and adjoining areas. The implementation of the Strategy will be overseen by a steering group of key statutory bodies.

All relevant plans and projects arising from the RMS will be subject to relevant statutory processes.

Vision for the New Forest SAC in 50 years

Over the centuries the New Forest has faced many difficult challenges. Many of the threats have diminished as legal protection and changing organisational and government policies have evolved. Indeed, in the last 20 years, a great start has been made on restoring habitats which were damaged by previous interventions including drainage of wet habitats, plantation forestry and the canalisation of water courses.

However, the New Forest faces new challenges in the face of global climate change and the issues that that brings. Hotter, drier summers; warmer, wetter winters; and more frequent and increasingly extreme weather events pose both socio-economic and ecological challenges. Thus, change is inevitable over the next century and beyond. The absolute need to maintain and restore the diverse habitats forming the New Forest SAC is critical to ensuring that it remains a robust and functional ecosystem that is able to thrive and support changing natural species populations over time.

Opportunities to sequester atmospheric carbon are being seriously considered by the UK Government, industry and the voluntary sectors. The restoration of peatlands, the

protection and enhancement of existing carbon-rich habitats and increased tree cover are being adopted as key methods of carbon capture and storage.

These all bring opportunities for additional habitat restoration and management to increase the climate change mitigation potential of New Forest SAC habitats. However, it is important that opportunities for carbon storage align with the Conservation Objectives of these internationally important habitats. For example, it is key that opportunities for expanding the semi-natural woodland habitats in the SAC are taken up by strategically creating new woodlands on suitable non-designated land around the perimeter of the protected site. Not only will this help to provide climate change mitigation but will also provide additional habitats for biodiversity to expand into and offer tailor-made recreational opportunities in more robust areas away from the sensitive core areas of special interest.

It is envisaged that by 2070:

- Existing SAC habitats are fully restored and ecologically functional;
- Opportunities to regenerate quintessential New Forest semi-natural habitats have been fully utilised, transforming large swathes of former conifer stands into rich and biodiverse habitats;
- Opportunities to broaden the area of semi-natural habitats around the SAC are grasped, buffering the core special interest and absorbing external pressures;
- The New Forest is globally recognised as an outstanding example of what can be achieved for nature conservation and biodiversity by expert management in the face of acute environmental change and crises, with clear objectives and commitments from all sectors with a passion for the New Forest.

Synopsis of contents

The SAC Management Plan consists of four parts and a bibliography as outlined below. Parts 1, 2 and 3 of the original SAC Management Plan have been refreshed in this version where there are important updates to the practical content of the Management Plan.

Part 1: Description

Provides a summary description, a non-technical description and a full technical description. The latter describes the SAC habitats in terms of the National Vegetation Classification and the Corine Classification as it applies to the Habitats Directive, as well as the habitats (and species) for which the SAC has been selected.

An Annex to Part 1 provides information on the cultural context of the New Forest.

Part 2: Evaluation

Sets out the various designations, the obligations arising from those designations, and provides a comparative evaluation of the nature conservation importance of the New Forest's habitats and species. It also provides a more holistic evaluation at the ecosystem level using the established Ratcliffe criteria. The nature conservation objectives for European features are set out. Finally, a SAC-wide monitoring system based upon condition assessment is described and a preliminary overview on habitat condition is given with priorities for further action.

Part 3: Generic prescriptions

Describes and discusses the issues which have the potential to significantly affect the condition of SAC habitats and species. It provides a suite of generic prescriptions for maintaining habitats in favourable condition, as well as a further suite for restoring habitats to favourable condition.

Part 4: Implementation plans

Contains the Site Management Statements for individual owners/occupiers. All implementation plans remain as written with the original publication of the SAC plan and available only as paper copies held by the individual owners/occupiers and Natural England.

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