



Catchment Sensitive Farming

Working together for a healthy environment

Agro-forestry: a wood-pasture's role in resource protection

Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF)

gets involved in the restoration of an unusual landscape on the Isle of Wight, helping to improve water quality and restore valuable habitat.

Background

A former dairy farm on the Isle of Wight was recently sold with the new owner interested in developing the land's environmental potential. Over several decades the grasslands had been intensively developed to make the dairy herds that grazed them more productive. This led to fields being under-drained, with hedgerows and mature oak trees removed to make field working easier. Unfortunately, this left the land with a limited habitat range. However, with around 60 mature oak trees remaining in one area, there was still hope of restoring some of the lost habitat.

Reference to old maps showed three fields with tree cover were once depicted as Common Land. The 1965 registration of commons showed sites like this on the island were rare, and rarer still had they been retained after intensive land use.

With a series of minor watercourses draining from the pastures to the Monktonmead, and then into the Solent at Ryde, any opportunities to remediate the land and enhance the farm's wildlife interest could have wider positive environmental consequences.

Countryside Stewardship

The new owner wished to investigate, with the help of a CSF Adviser, Mark Simmons, if restoration of the common would be practical and economically viable if supported by agri-environment scheme funding. With just a single eighteenth century map depicting three fields as common, and a scatter of open grown oaks, a feasibility study would be required to secure Countryside Stewardship payments under the 'Wood Pasture & Parkland' options. The **WD4**, **WD5** and **WD6** were possible options that could support the management, restoration or creation of that habitat. The Stewardship 'Feasibility study' option **PA2** enabled a complete study of the farm's landscape and wildlife to be undertaken. This provided the necessary information about the presumed former historic land use and

Countryside Stewardship scheme

This scheme allows farmers and landowners to obtain funding in return for providing environmental public goods, such as wood pastures or healthy hedgerows – the goal of which being to restore a healthy environment in England.

opportunities to create and restore wildlife habitats. As part of the study, Stewardship options were identified to ensure the watercourses would be kept free of any agricultural inputs such as fertilisers and pesticide runoff. Consideration was also given to



minimising any detriment to the watercourses by livestock.

Land Management



The remnant of wood-pasture at Ashley, Isle of Wight

The study concluded that the farm could be well managed under a low intensity grazing and hay cropping regime supported by Stewardship payments. To protect watercourses, no fertilisers would be applied and pesticides only by spot treatment. Fields occupying the former common would be under a maintenance or restoration option depending on the extent of tree cover, and additional planting would be needed to restore the wood pasture landscape. Cattle could be brought to the farm to graze the fields at an ultra-low stocking rate, such that watercourses would not be poached or the water contaminated with silt. With this management, all water draining from the farm would be as clean as it was entering. The Stewardship agreement included hedgerow restoration and management, extensive tree and shrub planting, and the diversification of grassland by sowing local wildflower seeds and green hay from donor sites.

One area of common was documented and mapped as coppiced woodland, so the Stewardship/Forestry Commission creation grant is to be used to re-establish tree cover. This would provide an additional habitat with a possible future extension to the wood pasture.

Results

The use of the Wood Pasture options under the Stewardship scheme provided:

- Complete protection of the farm's watercourses whilst enabling the farm to operate a livestock enterprise.
- The restoration and protection of an unusual historic landscape.
- The maintenance, restoration and creation of wood pasture - an important but poorly represented wildlife habitat.
- Improvement in soil health by low stocking and a cessation of nitrogen fertilisers and pesticides.

With CSF's help, and funding under the Countryside Stewardship scheme, the farm can now develop in a more environmentally sustainable way, doing its best for nature and preserving uncommon features on the Isle of Wight. It is hoped in the coming years more farmers and landowners on the island will undertake similar agro-forestry work to further reduce pollutant loads in its vital watercourses.