



Tackling today's management issues

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Tackling today's management issues

Management that replicates traditional land uses is often the best way to look after commons and greens today (see *FS3 Why does our common need to be looked after?* and *FS8 How to manage different habitats*). However, there are modern day issues that would not have affected commoners exercising their common rights in the past. These include the effects of unwanted artificial nutrient inputs from the atmosphere or from traffic, and water abstraction. There are also various modern day management methods which may be useful in looking after your common or green, such as the use of specialist machinery, herbicides, and biological controls, modern water control mechanisms and other techniques.

Nutrient levels

Commons and greens very often contain habitats or vegetation that have largely escaped the effects of modern agriculture (see *FS3 Why does our common need to be looked after?* for more information).

This means that 'old' grassland or heathland that has not been detrimentally affected by unwanted fertiliser or herbicides may be present (fertiliser promotes the growth of a few robust species which swamp more delicate species).



A build-up of unwanted nutrients on this heathland common has caused dense purple moor-grass to develop, swamping other species.

Similarly wet patches and flushes may survive that have not been drained and tamed. But even if this is the case on your common or green, you may still be seeing the effects of today's environmental pressures.

Traffic causes emissions of nitrogen into the atmosphere and this gets deposited, especially on land close to roads. This pollution is not visible, but the impact on plant growth may well be detectable and especially on sites, such as many commons and greens, where the background nutrient levels are naturally low.

Such pollution will encourage vigorous grasses and scrub to take over in place of more varied, herb-rich vegetation.

A similar effect may occur if your common or green is close to intensively farmed land, with dust from fertiliser or manure being blown off the farmland and onto the common, or ammonia from slurry going into the air and being deposited back on nearby land through rainfall.

The wider changes required to lower such nutrient loads in the atmosphere need to be tackled by society as a whole, but you may

be able to take steps to minimise the effects of too much nitrogen addition on your site. Regular harvesting and removal of grass or heath vegetation by cutting or grazing, and the removal of scrub growth are simple techniques that will hold unwanted nutrient levels at a moderate level.

Grazing can help remove nutrients, especially where the animals move off the common or spend the night sheltering in woodland (see *FS11 Grazing our common* for more information on the benefits and practicalities of grazing).

However, grazing may not be possible on your common or green, or you may need to supplement it with some cutting. A variety of machinery is now available to cut vegetation and some commons groups have invested in the purchase of a strimmer or mower for instance.

Hiring a contractor with specialist equipment is another option, depending on the scale of your requirement and of course funds, and whether you have volunteer help to tackle all or part of the job on a regular basis. Further information on these techniques can be found in *FS8 How to manage different habitats*.

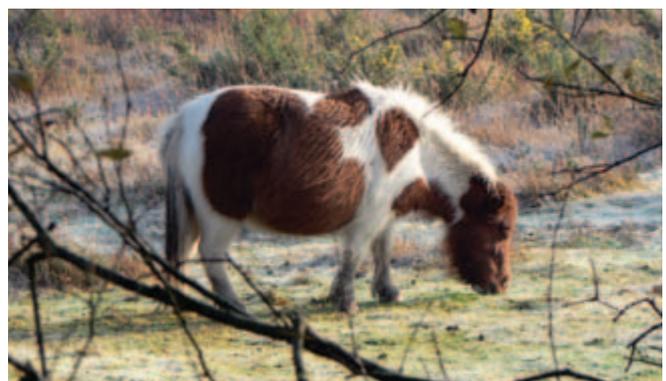
In some cases it may be desirable to consider stripping and removing or burying the top layers of the soil. This has been done extensively in heathland restoration in the Netherlands for instance, where atmospheric deposition has reached serious levels.

However, such methods are expensive and care needs to be taken to preserve archaeology and soil profiles (see the Natural England website for advice on soil conservation). Further advice is recommended if you feel this technique would be useful on your site (see text box).

Remember that commons and greens almost always have a long history of traditional use and the exercise of common rights such as turf cutting, grazing and fuel gathering, all of which removed nutrients and lowered fertility, allowing a wide range of plants to grow. Replication of these practices will help to counteract the effects of modern day nutrient deposition. The more special the vegetation on your common or green, the more desirable such action will be. Old, herb-rich turf on neutral or chalky soils or heathy vegetation on acidic soils will be especially vulnerable to nutrient build-up and so if your common supports such habitats, action to reduce this is particularly important.



Cutting vegetation and collecting the cut material in one operation



Conservation grazing in action



Speed restrictions at Lydlinch Common, Dorset

Traffic

Another issue associated with traffic is the use of a quiet road across or beside the common as a short cut or 'rat run'. This brings an urban feel to any site, and noise and pollution too. Discouraging such traffic brings real benefits for walkers, cyclists and riders and is especially important if livestock grazing the common are not fenced off from the road.

An advantage brought by grazing in such a situation is the usual requirement by the highway authority for speed limits and/or traffic calming. Indeed this sometimes brings additional support for reintroducing grazing by those local residents who wish to see a speed limit! These issues are covered in more detail in *FS11 Grazing our common* and *FS13 Works and consents*.

There can also be issues from traffic for wildlife. For instance, a quiet road across open land with bordering scrub may well have birds crossing frequently, especially if habitat is suitable on both sides of the road.

Even rare birds like Dartford warblers can become traffic casualties, particularly during the breeding season, an especially busy times for birds.

Road kills of night flying birds like barn owls are also sadly frequent and in all cases more likely if traffic is moving at speed. An impact with a large animal such as a deer is of course of concern for the safety of the driver as well as the animal.

Where to get further advice and help

The National Trust, RSPB, Natural England or your county Wildlife Trust can all give advice on harvesting methods and appropriate cutting machinery. You may also find that some sharing of equipment or hiring on a non-commercial basis is possible locally. Several such examples of 'machinery rings' exist, where groups own different pieces of equipment and are willing to share them, since they are rarely in use constantly (see *Sources of further information*). This is particularly the case where the equipment is specialised (and thus probably expensive) and might only be needed once in a while.

Tackling traffic speed is the best solution for wildlife and users of the common; however management of adjacent vegetation can also help. Making wildlife visible by removing taller herbage or dense scrub close to the road edges may also deter birds from nesting so near and from using both sides of the road.

Warning signs for motorists on the roadside, and reflector posts that flash in car headlights and scare away deer, are both widely used.

Consult your local council if these seem appropriate for your common or green, and be aware of the requirements for consent to put up structures on common land (see *FS13 Works and consents* for more information).

Watery issues

Clearing out ditches and ponds

The demand for water for industry, agriculture and domestic uses, especially in drier regions like the southeast, means that water tables often are lower than they once were and damp and wet places are increasingly prone to drying out. Although the underlying cause is a wider issue, you may be able to soften the impact on features such as ponds and ditches



Clearing a pond (P. Wakely © Natural England)

on your common or green. These habitats have a tendency to dry out naturally as sediment accumulates, so ponds turn gradually to marsh or reed-swamp or alder woods for instance.

Making sure that any pond or ditch is regularly cleaned out (taking care not to damage any sensitive habitats or species) will enable the maximum amount of water to be held when it is available. More information on this type of work and best timing is given in *FS8 Managing different habitats*.

Keeping it wet

The over-zealous draining of wet features like marshes and bogs in the past can make any lack of ground water even more noticeable. You can hold back water in any over-deepened ditch or streams by the careful placing of simple barriers or sluices. Such restoration is now widely practiced on some upland moors that have been drained in the past, and in the New Forest.

The principle behind these large-scale projects can be applied to an individual wet feature on any site. It is worth seeking advice from groups who have carried out similar work. Take care to consult the relevant body if your common carries any designation such as SSSI (see *FS6 How important is our common?*) and also to consult the Environment Agency if your proposals involve the blocking of any watercourse.



Using a brushcutter to cut reeds (P. Wakely © Natural England)

Such works on minor streams are usually fine but you need to check if there are any special features or if the watercourse in your case constitutes a 'main river' in which case EA consent would be needed. It is also important to ensure that your actions do not raise water levels on paths or access routes or neighbouring land at times of high rainfall when flooding can occur.

Dealing with pollutants

You may have a watercourse that comes onto your common carrying pollution or high nutrient levels, for instance from a farm. If the amount of pollution is serious, ask the Environment Agency to investigate and take any appropriate action.

If the stream has rather too much nutrient, for instance from fertiliser run-off on neighbouring land, establishing a small reed bed where the stream comes onto the common can soak up excessive nitrogen.

The reeds can then be cut periodically and removed, allowing new reeds to grow and maintain the process. This also provides an interesting additional habitat for wildlife.

Managing habitats for conservation (see *Sources of further information*) includes useful information on sluices and reed beds, and contact the Environment Agency, your County Wildlife Trust or the RSPB for further advice.



A volunteer work party burning cut scrub
(J. Davis © Butterfly Conservation)

Disposing of organic material

The use of a bonfire to get rid of cut material, for instance resulting from cutting scrub, has always been a traditional part of volunteer work parties and there is a social element to this activity as well as the practical one – potatoes baked in a fire are always popular on a work party!

But not every site can accommodate a bonfire, especially if there are near neighbours to consider, and in any case the weather may not be always suitable.

Disposing of cut material, especially larger volumes might be best done by hiring a wood chipper or engaging a contractor with this equipment. You might be able to use the chips - on a path for instance, or invite volunteers to take away bags for use in their own gardens or



Large amounts of woodchip like this can be used for energy generation; smaller amounts can sometimes be used for path surfacing or mulch

for composting. Another alternative would be to take the cut material to a local composting facility if available.

If you do have bonfires, be careful where they are sited. Be aware of neighbours' buildings (including thatched roofs!) and vegetation that may be at risk, and take account of wind direction. A fire will change the soil for many years as well as killing any plants close by, so take great care in choosing the most suitable place.

Using corrugated iron sheets under the fire can make it easier to remove ashes, which will otherwise increase the fertility of the soil.

Use of chemicals

Because commons and greens may have largely escaped treatment by herbicides or pesticides, you should consider very carefully any resort to their use now and this may include the need for a wider public consultation.

However, there may be circumstances that justify their use, such as a localised stand of an unwanted plant that can be treated without risk to other species (see *FS12 Saints and sinners* for examples), or dense growth of bracken that can respond well to quite specific herbicide.

Any such use of chemicals is a skilled job though and is generally best left to qualified professional contractors.

Biological controls

Biological controls are increasingly being used to deal with unwanted or invasive plants or insects. Always seek professional advice and consult widely if this seems like an option on your common.

It is important to ensure that any biological control species is suitable for the task in hand and will not have any undesired effects. Consult the Environment Agency if you need further information.

Sources of further information

Conservation organisations to contact for advice:

County Wildlife Trusts

■ www.wildlifetrusts.org

Natural England office:

■ www.naturalengland.org.uk

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds:

■ www.rspb.org.uk

The National Trust:

■ www.nationaltrust.org.uk

For examples of restoring wet features (mire restoration) see:

Forestry Commission

■ www.forestry.gov.uk

And Exmoor National Park in:

■ www.peatlands.org.uk

For more information on machinery rings:

■ www.machineryrings.org.uk

The Environment Agency (for advice on water issues and biological controls):

■ www.environment-agency.gov.uk

■ *Managing habitats for conservation* (1995) eds. W.J. Sutherland & D.A. Hill, CUP

Credits

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Cover image: Building a sluice to raise water levels (P. Wakely ©Natural England)

One of a series of Factsheets created to help stimulate management on common land and village greens in England.



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