

Letter of Intent to English Nature from Sir Charles Burrell, 2002

ESTABLISHING A BIODIVERSE WILDERNESS

AREA IN THE LOW WEALD OF SUSSEX

Some ecologically minded Sussex farmers have been very impressed by the radical theories of Dutch ecologist Frans Vera. Having visited the Oostvaardersplassen, only 30 minutes away from Amsterdam, it seemed ridiculous that there wasn't a similar experiment in lowland Britain. In the Sussex Low Weald there is a block of about 3,500 hectares occupied by sympathetic farmers who would be happy to conduct a land management experiment for an initial 25 years.

Vera's theory states that it was not man's activities that created the patchwork of habitats in lowland Europe, but the natural grazing and browsing habitats of large herbivores. The presence of these large animals drives a system of forest succession from open grassland to thorny scrub to mature woodland and back again to open grassland in a cycle lasting hundreds of years.

In the Oostvaardersplassen the large herbivores introduced were red deer, Heck cattle (a modern recreation of the extinct aurochs) and Konik horses (a modern re-creation of the extinct tarpan). These three species and the annual migration of thousands of geese have created a biodiverse habitat for many rare species of birds, plants and insects.

In Sussex, the proposed animal introductions are: red deer, fallow deer, wild boar, European beaver, European bison, Heck cattle and ponies. A single suckler herd of domestic cattle could be ranched over the area until stocks of the introduced herbivores build up.

The whole area would be ringfenced. All internal fencing would be removed, apart from fencing around houses and buildings. The public roads would be cattle gridded, apart from one 'A' road which would have wide land bridges for animals constructed mainly from surplus subsoil from local housing developments.

A visitor centre could be built or converted from an existing barn. Hides could be constructed for animal and bird watching. Dams could be built and scrapes dug, creating additional areas of open water and swamps.

A ranger and an assistant would be needed to check fences and destroy badly injured or sick animals. The carcasses, unfit for human consumption would be left for the scavenging mammals, birds and insects like any other natural system. This area is not big enough to contemplate the reintroduction of a large natural predator, so man will have to be the substitute predator. Once the population of the introduced animals have reached a predetermined stocking rate, all species would be culled apart from the ponies. The ponies

would be rounded up annually and surplus animals sold. It is hoped that a market for the meat of culled animals would help to defray culling costs.

There are several potential areas of conflict with existing rules and regulations but it is hoped that these are not insurmountable. For example, it would be undesirable (and dangerous) to handle the Heck cattle, so ear tags and animal passports would be impossible. The ethics of allowing animals to live for their natural lives and then dying of old age might also be contentious. The general public don't mind seeing a dead shrew or rabbit, but dislike seeing (and smelling) a dead deer or cow. However, with wild boar in the ecological system, carcasses will not be left lying around for long.

Some of the recolonizing plant species would be considered noxious weeds by DEFRA (and neighbouring farmers). There would also be public safety issues with the general public using existing rights of way. In the Netherlands there were conflicts between dog walkers and conservationists and problems with mares being ridden while in season and attracting wild stallions.

However, with good signage and ranger guidance, physical risk to the public should be minimal. The residents in the local villages and towns could be invited to talks and discussions so that the risks posed by these large animals could be fully explained. The greatest risk probably being to car drivers on the unfenced minor roads and lanes. Large wild herbivores with young can be dangerous especially to dog walkers. Perhaps it would be possible to restrict dogs to limited areas where they would do little damage to the wildlife and wouldn't put themselves and their owners in any danger.

The wilderness would be managed by the farmers themselves. Occasionally, outside expert advice would be sought from both NGOs and government agencies. At the end of the initial 25-year period, the proprietors would review the situation and decide whether to continue with this minimalist form of land management or revert to more intensive agriculture.