

Creating Naturalistic Grazing In Lowland England

RESEARCH NOTE

April 2007



A report by:
Kernon Countryside Consultants
and Land Use Consultants



Kernon Countryside Consultants
Brook Cottage
Purton Stoke
Swindon
SN5 4JE



Land Use Consultants
Royal Colonnade
14 Great George Street
Bristol
BS1 5RH

CREATING NATURALISTIC GRAZING:

A NEED FOR POLICY CHANGE?

Introduction

This Research Note details some issues faced by landowners if they wish to adopt management practices which would support the development of more natural conditions in Lowland England and sets out the policy and fiscal changes which may be necessary to support a change to those practices.

It draws on the experiences of the Knepp Castle Estate in Sussex in developing a Feasibility Assessment and Holistic Business Plan to support their vision for an estate which allows natural processes to predominate.

The Vision

We can never realistically re-create or build a true wilderness in Lowland England. It may, however, be possible to deliver environmental and landscape enhancement through an approach which allows natural processes to predominate. Ultimately this could be termed "re-wilding". Under this approach areas of lowland England would be left to evolve without technical or human interference. The mosaic of vegetation cover that might evolve as a result of grazing pressure alone is attractive to some land managers.

What Are The Barriers?

A number of potential barriers to achieving such a vision have been identified:

- a) **size.** There is no minimum or maximum area for a wilderness, but to allow roaming herds of grazing animals with sufficient space to be selective about where they choose to graze, an extensive tract of land is needed. We anticipate that an area of at least 1000ha is needed, although it is to be stressed that meaningful changes could be brought about on smaller areas, subject to other limitations;
- b) **grazier.** Historic breeds of grazing animal – cattle, deer and boar – have long since been domesticated. No truly-wild large herbivores remain. Some domestic variants are genetically closer to ancient breeds than others, such as Heck cattle, Konik or Exmoor ponies. However, whilst modern variants may not be historically-accurate, their grazing pressure is anticipated to be similar;
- c) **animal management.** Wildernesses are, by definition, wild and unmanaged. Modern animal management and welfare requirements do not permit livestock to be left completely unmanaged. Some animals may need special licences (wild boars, for example, require a Dangerous Wild Animals licence). Cattle, pigs and horses all have passport, identification, tagging and in some cases regular disease testing obligations (e.g. TB), together with animal

welfare obligations to prevent and reduce stress and suffering. These requirements significantly limit the potential to allow true wilderness to develop as a result of unmanaged and natural grazing by wild herbivores. Animal collection, handling and observation requirements need to be met;

- d) **fencing.** Animals must be controlled, even if only by external fencing. This limits the creation of true wilderness because it prevents migration beyond the boundaries of the area, either to mix with other herds, or due to grazing pressure. Several limitations result:
- there becomes a need to manage populations of grazing herbivores to prevent interbreeding and to control over-population;
 - in times of grazing stress, such as during a drought, containment may result in grazing pressure uncharacteristic of wilderness. Without fences, herds could migrate to better pasture but if contained herds might graze vegetation they would, without stress, have left;
 - the natural movement of other mammals, such as badger, fox or stoat, may be hindered by fencing;
- e) **public access.** There are few substantial areas of lowland England where there is no public access. The existence of public rights of way, from footpath to road, brings obligations in terms of freedom of access (eg mown or cleared routes) and public safety, which necessitates management;
- f) **taxation.** Fiscal limitations occur if land ceases to be used for agriculture. Whilst there is no test of commerciality about the venture, land ceases to benefit from currently generous Agricultural Property Relief capital taxation allowances if it ceases to be agricultural land, which means that the animals must be kept for human consumption or other products. For Income Tax purposes, there must be a view to the realisation of profits. Current taxation structures necessitate (or encourage) management of the animals, against true wilderness principles;
- g) **economics.** Even with agricultural alternatives facing testing economic times, the potential loss of funding from the Single Farm Payment, Entry Level or Higher Level Stewardship Schemes etc., is a significant constraint to potential uptake. Wildernesses do not give rise to favourable income expectations;
- h) **landscape and environmental issues.** The existence of Listed Parkland and buildings, Scheduled Ancient Monuments, areas of wildlife interest or Site of Special Scientific Interest designations all influence the particular management of particular areas, and at least locally may prevent landscape being allowed to change to wilderness.

Overall, the main constraints to the creation of wilderness are:

- animal welfare issues;
- public right of way and safety issues;
- capital and income tax implications.

What Is Needed To Encourage Wilderness Provision?

The study on the Knepp Castle Estate has shown how far an estate in Lowland England can adopt a low-intensity management regime in support of an evolution to “wilderness”. Currently the creation of such areas is limited by the need to maintain an element of agricultural management and practice for animal welfare and taxation reasons. Further, public safety issues limit the type of animals that can be allowed to graze the areas. These limitations still allow the potential for a meaningful and exciting change to the biology and landscape, but they prevent the creation of a really “wild” area.

To achieve the low-intensity naturalistic grazing originally envisaged by the Estate, and promote its wider adoption, some fiscal or legislative changes would be necessary. Three of the main limitations could potentially be removed through special project derogations:

- i) **public access limitations.** The risk to the public from unmanaged animals, plus the need to maintain rights of way, hinder “wilderness”. If alternative but controlled public access obligations are undertaken, the removal of the unfettered public right to access along linear footpaths and bridleways would create significantly greater opportunities to develop “wilderness”, and would allow greater use of “wild” animals. This would need legal input to divert or stop-up, perhaps temporarily, rights of way;
- ii) **animal identification regulations.** If “wildernesses” are developed within ring fences, and there is no interchange with animals grown for human consumption outside the fence, then there should be no risk to human health or to animal disease transmission through a relaxation of current ear tagging and passport obligations. This would allow “wilderness” to be observed, carrying out animal welfare operations as needed, but without the need for handling of animals on a more frequent basis;
- iii) **fiscal changes.** The current property tax-relief rules were devised anticipating the continuation of commercial agriculture, and allow for property to pass between owners without considerable taxation thus enabling land holdings to remain intact. “Wildernesses” could bring significant landscape and ecological benefits, as well as tremendous scientific information, and a change to the rules, or special derogations, are needed to remove the need to maintain an element of agricultural use and still allow the “wilderness” to be transferred intact between parties without unbearable taxation. The projects would deliver other benefits.

In addition, it is likely that funding will be needed to bring about change. “Wilderness” creation will go outside existing funding arrangements for agriculture and is unlikely, of itself, to generate sufficient income to be sustainable. The development of appropriate funding streams is considered necessary.