

# **HLS AGM Chairman's speech May 2019**

## **Words of Welcome**

Thank you all for coming this evening. We are nearing the end of the 10 year life of the Verderers' HLS which is a partnership between the Verderers, the NPA and the Forestry Commission.

So this is a timely moment to look back at some of the highlights of the life of the Scheme which expires in February 2020.

## **The Vision for the HLS was this:**

By 2020, the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship will have created a lasting legacy of investment for the New Forest that will give sustainable benefits to Forest communities, wildlife, habitats and visitors, and safeguard a viable future for commoning that lasts well beyond the life of the Scheme.

There are 3 key tests that all projects supported by the HLS must satisfy namely :

- i) protecting the New Forest's unique agricultural commoning practices;*
- ii) conserving the New Forest's traditional landscape, wildlife and aesthetic character, including its flora and fauna, peacefulness, natural beauty and cultural heritage;*
- iii) securing a viable future for commoning.*

Against that background I propose to talk about some of the key areas of the work of the Scheme. I think you will be amazed, as I am, by the breadth of the work and the scale of what has been achieved.

## **Restoration of Wood Pasture, Parkland and lowland heath**

Approximately 12.500 hectares of the New Forest is heath and grassland

Much work has been done to improve these areas by removing invasive plants and trees, which are crowding out our native plants as well as restoring lawns – those wonderful large grassy areas where stock graze and which are vital for a huge range of species.

Projects have included

- Control of Invasive and Non-Native Tree Species : Eg : Rhododendron clearance - All Rhododendron on the Open Forest has been identified and treated or cut and burnt at least once over the past 9 years.
- Open Habitat restoration : On in excess of 30 sites there has been clearance of regeneration after conifer felling including Stump Clearance of felled areas to restore the areas to open grazing

### **Restoration of Species Rich Grassland**

- in excess of 130 hectares of conifer, pine and scrub has been removed as part of the lost lawns projects.
- Bracken Management - in excess of 600 hectares of bracken has been forage harvested or sprayed.
- Verge Restoration – over 20,000 metres of car free ditching has been dug and Dragons teeth and barriers installed to protect and reinstate verges that have been damaged by vehicles. Once completed, this project will have restored a sizeable area of land that has been damaged and eroded by vehicles. Although this work has attracted controversy from a few it is vital work.

### **Restoration of Lowland Heath**

Many foreign plants have escaped from our gardens during the last century and are out-competing our native plants. The problem is particularly severe along rivers, which provide ‘pathways’ for infestation.

Invasive species on rivers can smother or kill native wildlife, spread disease, cause serious bank erosion, increase flood risk and even provide a risk to human health and safety.

Projects have included

- Management of non native and invasive species in the Forest’s wetlands and Ponds. Much of this painstaking and back breaking work has been carried out by our volunteers.

## **Educational Access**

This is a key area for the HLS. Educating young people about the Forest is one of the keys to ensuring that people understand and appreciate what the Forest is and what makes it so special.

An Education Access pack/toolkit has been created which has enabled:

- 296 HLS funded visits – over 250 schools – over 14,000 children - all visits received excellent feedback
- Visits from 49 secondary schools.
- A Conference for 50 primary school teachers (New Forest Curriculum; thus embedding learning about the New Forest National Park in schools' curricula)

## **Wetland Restoration**

The New Forest supports one of only four significant sites of bog woodland in the UK, as well as one of the six best sites of riverside woodland.

Together with other scarce wetland habitats, the Forest also contains 75% of the remaining lowland valley bog or 'mire' systems in north-western Europe.

- Over 30km of channel and drains have been restored between 2010 and 2018 on over 60 different SSSI sites
- Over 50 different ponds have been surveyed – Riverfly Volunteers have worked tirelessly on ponds, wetlands and streams to gather data on species.
- In excess of 30 specialist species/ habitat surveys and monitoring reports have been compiled over the term of the agreement in order to review management practices and inform future management. These include the breeding populations of rare birds which led to the designation of a Special Protection Area (woodlark, nightjar and Dartford Warbler) and the breeding populations of wading bird species (Lapwing, Redshank, Snipe, Curlew, Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover and Oyster Catcher).

As I think many of you will already know the winning entry for the prestigious 2019 UK River Prize, an award which recognises and celebrates the achievements of individuals and organisations committed to improving the UK's rivers and catchments, was the 'New Forest Wetlands'.

The entries were judged by a panel of industry experts, including Martin Janes (The River Restoration Centre), Oliver Lowe (Natural Resources Wales), Pam Nolan (Environment Agency), Ann Skinner (Independent) and Christopher Spray (University of Dundee).

Against stiff competition, the overall winner was announced as the 'New Forest Wetlands' partnership project for its restoration of 60 stream and mire Sites of Special Scientific Interest, across the New Forest area.

Commenting on the winners' achievement, Martin Janes, Managing Director of The River Restoration Centre said:

*"It was impossible to ignore the huge amount of work that this partnership has undertaken over the past nine years, leading to the improvement and protection of rare wetland habitat. Visually, the finished work demonstrates incredible attention to detail, often restoring the stream component to its old course and floodplain with remarkably few visible scars to the landscape, as if it had been there for centuries."*

## **Historic Environment**

The HLS has provided a wonderful opportunity to improve our knowledge and understanding of the history and archaeology of the Forest.

- Thanks to LiDAR Survey & Aerial Photos - 20,130 hectares have been surveyed - 3,195 sites have now been deposited with the Hampshire Archaeology and Historic Buildings Record with many more still to be processed and deposited before the end of 2019. Work has also commenced to deposit the LiDAR data with the Archaeology Data Service (ADS), in order to provide public access to data where possible.

## **Grazing management**

The New Forest pony is of course the iconic symbol of the Forest. More than that they are the architects of the Forest landscape and are integral to commoning which is part of the unique cultural heritage of the Forest. Like many of you I spend many hours explaining how the Forest works. When I tell people that we have here a system of dispersed pastoral farming which has been practised by our ancestors for thousands of years, the scales fall from their eyes. Grazing management has thus been a key part of our work. Here are some highlights:

**The Verderers' Grazing Scheme** : Over 80% of eligible stock is now entered into the **VGS** with over 500 commoners committed to achieving the agreements objectives of habitat and feature condition, with a view to long term sustainability

**The New Forest Pounds** : these play an important role in the success of commoning and are symbols of the unique cultural heritage of the New Forest. 23 pounds have been rebuilt during the project in hardwood for safety and longevity.

**Sightline and Driftway fencing**: in excess of 16,000m fencing has been erected to assist in stock management and animal safety.

**Reflective Collars** : In the region of 17,000 reflective collars have been fitted to ponies, donkeys and cattle. Reflective ear tags are now being introduced for cattle aimed at improving the welfare of the forest stock.

**The Verderers' Stallion Scheme** : has managed to support commoning by managing the number and period for turning out stallions on the Forest. It has also benefited the value and future of the breed which is essential to the future of the Forest landscape.

**The Futurity Scheme** : offers incentives to commoners for young colts with important bloodlines to be brought forward for inspection and retained as potential future stallions.

**The Bloodlines Scheme** has successfully regenerated the gene pool of the native New Forest Pony. The scheme was run in 2011 resulting in 4 stallions joining the Verderers Stallion Scheme and to date 218 foals with important rare bloodlines have been born. The scheme was repeated in 2015 and the first foals from the 3 resulting stallions are due to arrive shortly.

**The New Forest Pony Publicity Group and the New Forest Pony Enthusiasts Club** work to improve the value and diversity of the New Forest Pony Breed by showcasing the versatility of the breed and its suitability for all equestrian disciplines. This work is important to promote the breed and secure a viable future for the New Forest's unique commoning practices.

## **New Forest Land Advice Service**

Farming today is increasingly complex and technical. Good quality advice and training is essential to commoning.

The New Forest Land Advice Service:

- provides advice and training to commoners to ensure best practice
  - advises on legislation regulations, land management and rules relating to the HLS Scheme. E.g. Cross compliance and Nitrate Vulnerable Zones.
- Organises a huge variety of courses to support commoners and commoning.

## **In summary**

The HLS has delivered a wide range of long lasting benefits for the Forest

## **So what does the future hold?**

The current scheme expires in February 2020. The work of protecting and enhancing the Forest is endless. Many in the Forest have been actively engaged in trying to secure future funding for the Forest. Our strong preference is for a bespoke, flexible scheme that suits the needs of the Forest. The Forest Farming Group is actively engaging with Government both at the political level and with the relevant civil servants about a future scheme.

## **Thank you**

There are so many people who work so hard to deliver the benefits of the HLS scheme and they are due thanks from us all. However it is not possible to mention them all but I would like to pay tribute to the staff of Natural England for all their hard work and for sticking with projects in the face of criticism. I would also thank the CDA who have engaged constructively and supportively with the work of the HLS. Also worthy of specific mention is The New Forest Pony Publicity Group whose volunteers, after some 20 years of dedicated work, are retiring.

Finally thanks to Tina.

May 2019

