

Case Study

Beddingham Hill SNCI –

A successful example of multi-agency funding

Background

Valuable wildlife areas exist in many parts of the South Downs outside of the protected Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). These pockets of habitat, which are often found on farms and private land, form a valuable reservoir of wildlife which can provide important links to the larger but often fragmented SSSIs; these important sites are known as 'Sites of Nature Conservation Interest' (SNCI).

SNCI designation is a non-statutory designation and carries no legal obligations. However, the selection of sites as SNCIs helps planning agencies to protect them from development that would otherwise damage their nature conservation value. There is also a need to encourage sympathetic land management of these valuable wildlife areas, for example by not applying any artificial fertilizer, slurry or farmyard manure the floral diversity will be maintained and possibly increased.

Beddingham Hill is a designated SNCI site and Open Access Land. In 2011 the poor condition of the site was brought to the attention of the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) by the Sussex Ramblers who had experienced difficulty in accessing the site due to scrub encroachment. One of our Rangers visited the site and recommended that the site, located just below Firle Escarpment SSSI (which is designated for its chalk grassland habitat), was an ideal location for a restoration project.

We worked closely with the tenant farmer of the Firle Estate (upon whose land the SNCI is sited) and partners such as Butterfly Conservation Sussex to plan this large scale clearance and restoration project; all were keen to have the site cleared to improve the habitat for wildlife. The Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS) agreed to undertake scrub clearance as part of their on-going programme of conservation tasks carried out across the South Downs.

The SDNPA identified £7,600 of funds from the Nature Improvement Area project (2012–15) to support this activity and the tenant farmer agreed to contribute £2,500 from their Higher Level Stewardship.

Protecting valuable wildlife



Horseshoe vetch



Dingy skipper

The project

In 2012 the tenant farmer started scrub clearance work; the northern slope, western edge (which are surrounded by grassland) and valley bottom were cleared first. Clearing this area first would enable some of the chalk downland flora to spread from the existing grassland onto the bare ground created by the clearance and then down through the entire site.

During the three year period 2012–15 several clearings were created with connecting rides joining one clearing to the next. The site was now largely bare ground through the middle with varied age scrub and woodland edges. A mixture of habitat was kept as a mosaic to give flora and fauna more opportunity to thrive, as well as maintaining the scrub and woodland to provide shelter for livestock.

In July 2015, the SDNPA was approached by an ecologist from Tim Moya Associates, looking for a receptor site for reptiles (predominantly slow worms and common lizards) being displaced from a development site to the east of Polegate, East Sussex. Given its size, topography, aspect, and importantly its proximity to the donor site, the SNCI site at Beddingham provided an ideal site for the reptiles.

Whilst the work carried out had created grassland habitats ideal for reptiles, surveys of the grassland in the summer of 2015 revealed low reptile populations, suggesting that a natural re-colonisation of reptiles in this area would take some time. Thereby providing an ideal opportunity for translocation of an existing colony.

As part of the agreement the Tim Moya Associates contributed £4,370 towards further habitat improvement works at the site including additional scrub clearance.

“The site is in fine shape, there were literally clouds of moths and butterflies flying around us”

Steve Teale – Moth Recorder

The outcome

Many chalk grassland species have now spread across the site. Species have moved from the small pockets of chalk grassland which remained in the clear sections (visible on the left hand photograph below) into the newly cleared areas.

A survey carried out in 2013 highlighted several chalk grassland species present on site, such as kidney vetch, horseshoe vetch, common bellflower and harebell. Whilst the recorded butterfly species identified on the site following clearance were dark green fritillary, dingy skipper and small blue.

Data shows that the land management practices adopted are proving effective and the site is recovering well. The site will be surveyed annually to monitor changes and cattle will graze the site over winter from 2016 to further help improve the sward.

The farmers have developed an interest in the species that are recolonising the site, reviewing all survey data to learn more about the present species, further informing the development of ecologically friendly land management practices.

The approach from Tim Moya Associates has successfully demonstrated that there are other viable sources of funding for a conservation project (in addition to traditional funders such as DEFRA, Natural England, and local authorities).

The future

The long term future of the project will be supported by the land management plan created by the SDNPA and tenant farmer. SDNPA will continue to provide support albeit in a less ‘hands on’ way.

There is potential for the VRS to continue working on the site and once the grazing is in place the site will ‘take care of itself’. Therefore no additional funds will be required.

This project provided a good learning opportunity for thinking of other ways to fund conservation projects. There are certainly other occasions when relocation sites are needed. Going forward SDNPA will proactively promote its services to development companies seeking suitable sites for translocation, thereby providing a valuable income stream to fund conservation projects.

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