

Case Study

Caring for the South Downs National Park for 35 years: Reflections of a Ranger

Background

The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) employ a team of Rangers divided into four Area teams based across the National Park (including the Western Downs, Wealden Heath, Central Downs and Eastern Downs).

Ranger services are part of all National Park Services in the UK and globally.

(<http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk/>)

The Rangers are a key component of the SDNPA's work, providing local contact, knowledge and acting as a mediator between the landscape and people.

Each Area team comprises an Area Manager, Rangers and Volunteer Rangers. The teams are there to enable and facilitate National Park purposes by providing specialist advice on biodiversity, access and land management adding value to the work of land managers, community and conservation groups, parish councils, farmers and others in delivering National Park objectives.

Typical tasks include (but not limited to):

- Offering training and support to local communities
- Leading walks
- Organising and training volunteers
- Chalk grassland and heathland conservation
- Scrub clearance
- Woodland management
- Hedge laying
- Improving public access
- Surveys of flora and fauna



Mark Hayward (Left) with fellow Rangers of the Eastern Area team

The project

Mark Hayward, Ranger for the Eastern Area team, started as a trainee ranger for the South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service (VRS) in 1983. The work of the VRS was integral to getting the South Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) designated as a National Park in 2011.

In the '80's Mark was based at Seven Sisters Country Park in the south east Heritage Coast Area. He was part of a team of eight, working out of a workshop, using 2-way radios for communication and only one Land Rover to share between them. His role was mainly focused on Rights of Way: marking routes, producing signs, installing gates and clearing footpaths. Conservation work and chalk grassland habitat management were also carried out on Local Wildlife Sites and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

With the formation of the Sussex Downs Conservation Board in the early '90's, Mark had progressed to a Ranger and was based in a small office at Stanmer Park, where there was only one computer between a team of 5. This also marked a significant change in the focus of the AONB. Its aim was to promote and manage the AONB in East and West Sussex and concentrated more on conservation and partnership work. The success of this partnership led to the establishment of the South Downs Joint Committee and the final push for the establishment of the South Downs National Park – however it took nearly 30 years to do.

The role of a Ranger has changed considerably in the last 35 years. Initially, 90% of Mark's time would be spent outdoors, today it is 50% office based. Building relationships with people, communities and local organisations is crucial to the success of conservation work; as are volunteers. Over the years, Mark has worked alongside many hundreds of volunteers whose invaluable commitment has ensured the National Park is looked after for current and future generations.

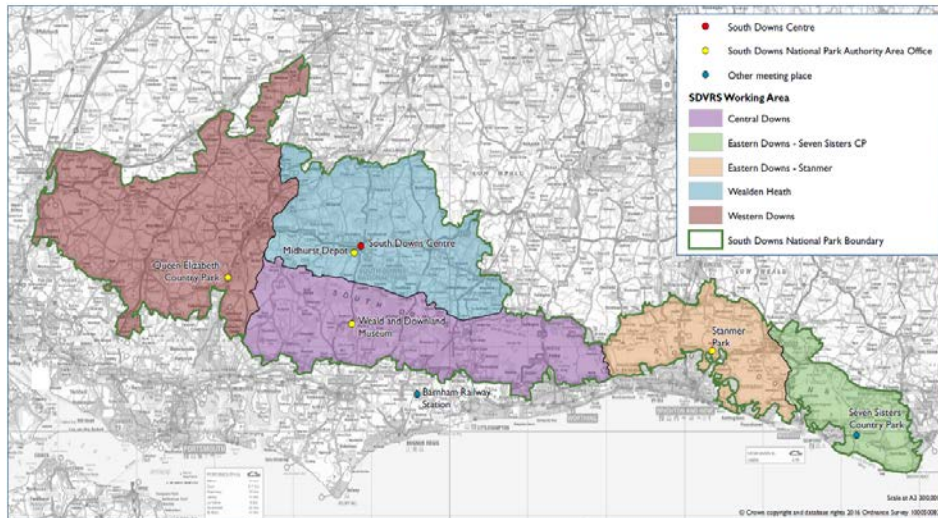
“What motivates me to keep going? Working with the incredible team of volunteers and staff I have met over the years. Their dedication, the joy they bring and the laughter shared, make the work of a Ranger the best in the world.”

Mark Hayward, SDNPA Ranger (Eastern area team)

The outcome

Some of the many projects Mark has worked on over the years have included:

- **Hedge laying Training:** With the help of the South of England Hedge Laying Society, Mark has trained hundreds of people over the last 16 years, ensuring that this important rural skill is continued. Laying hedges traditionally helps farmers to manage their hedgerows in a sensitive way, which increases biodiversity and wildlife.
- **Construction and restoration of Dew Ponds:** A dew pond is an artificial pond intended for watering livestock, generally used in areas where a natural supply of surface water may not be readily available. Mark has built and restored 10 ponds directly and supported colleagues in restoring a further 5.
- **Flint Wall Training:** Over the past 8 years Mark has been working to restore the boundary wall at Stanmer Park. This work has been used to train others in this important rural skill, including staff from other UK National Parks.
- **Ensuring Access for All:** after the CRoW Act was introduced in 2000, Mark worked with every parish, farmer and landowner within his patch to install hundreds of stiles and kissing gates to give the general public access to the land.



The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP)

2014–19 sets out a shared vision for how we all would like the National Park to be in the future. It includes 11 long-term outcomes, and provides a framework for communities, landowners, charities, businesses and public bodies to work together to make this vision and these outcomes a reality.

The Rangers and the work they carry out achieve all PMP outcomes:

- A thriving living landscape
- People connected with places
- Towards a sustainable future

More info: <http://www.southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/SDNP-Partnership-Management-Plan-2014-19.pdf>

The future

The SDNPA will continue to:

- Work with the South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service (SDVRS) to look after and help conserve the special qualities of the South Downs.
- Provide training for rangers/volunteers
- Liaise with other stakeholders & organisations across the South Downs, which is key to our success

We depend on the hundreds of wonderful people who give up their spare time to carry out volunteer conservation work on the South Downs. These volunteers make an enormous contribution to conserving and enhancing the South Downs as well as enabling better access and supporting work in local communities.

Please visit our website if you would like to know more about getting involved:

<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/care-for/volunteering/volunteering-ranger-service/>

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