

LIMESTONE COUNTRY PROJECT (LIFE)

Introduction

The Limestone Country Project is a five year project with a £1.27 million budget. Of this £550K is from the European Union LIFE (Nature) fund. For those not familiar with LIFE funding – it is specifically allocated to support the implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directive, and hence is only available for use on Natura 2000 sites to ensure these internationally important wildlife sites are managed appropriately for wildlife. There have been 682 LIFE- Nature projects approved for co-financing between 1992 and the end of 2003, targeting approximately 10% of the c. 17,000 Natura 2000 sites.

The Limestone Country Project is a partnership project, jointly project managed by myself (Paul Evans, English Nature) and Tim Thom of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority. However there are a number of other partners including the National Trust, the Grazing Animals Project, National Beef Association and the Rare Breeds Survival Trust.

The overriding objective of the project is ‘restore habitats within the Ingleborough Complex and Craven Limestone Complex Special Areas for Conservation by encouraging a return to mixed farming using hardy upland cattle breeds’. More specifically we are looking to enhance/restore habitats over a minimum of 1,500 ha of the project area.

As part of the project we are also increasing knowledge of the internationally important habitats, and the role of hardy cattle breeds in their management. We have therefore commissioned various aspects of research to the tune of £130,000 over the five year period. We are keen to disseminate experience gained to a range of audiences, including not only other farmers and land managers, but also policy makers including DEFRA and the European Commission, in the hope of influencing the development of agriculture policy and future agri-environment and rural development schemes.

Background

To set the scene a little background information. The Yorkshire Dales landscape and habitats have been influenced to a large degree through a long history of pastoral farming - there is very little of the Dales which is not grazed with livestock – only 1% native woodland cover and much of this is still used for shelter.

Agricultural census returns over last 40 years show a general decline in mixed farming – for a variety of reasons, both economic and cultural. Sheep now definitely ‘rule the roost’. Research carried out during the development of the LIFE project bid showed clearly that much of the higher limestone land is now grazed exclusively by sheep. Despite having had a long history of summer cattle grazing the land is now seen either as too dangerous for cattle, not of good enough forage quality or cattle grazing just seen as a too labour intensive farming practice. Where cattle are still present these tend to be the

larger commercial continental breeds and are rarely left on the land for any significant time period.

Agri-environment schemes cover large areas of land and we have seen major nature conservation gains over the past 10 years - most of the overgrazing problems have been addressed. However these schemes have often been 'one size fits all' and have lacked the flexibility to tailor management required for areas of high nature conservation value (for example Natura 2000 sites). It is a poor reflection on the current agri-environment that many habitats on agreement land still remain in unfavourable condition.

Socio-economics

To expand a little more on the socio-economic context of the project a few facts and figures - The project area is under a range of private, public and charitable ownerships, with the National Trust and English Nature owning c. 3,000 of the 11,000 ha. The remainder of the land is owned and or managed by approximately one hundred farmers with the primary use being hill sheep flocks – providing lambs for fattening in the lowlands, and suckler cow herds producing weaned calves for finishing in the lowlands. A small number of dairy farms are located in the southern part of the project area.

Production subsidies have led the dramatic increase through the 1950-90s with over a doubling of sheep numbers during this period, however the introduction of the sheep quota system stabilised the situation. A combination of commercial decisions and public demand for lean beef led to both a general reduction in cattle numbers and also a move to different cattle breeds.

Overall farming in the project area is marginal, suffering from a number of handicaps including remoteness; terrain, soil fertility and climate – and farm incomes are entirely dependent on subsidies. In 2000 direct farm subsidies represented 4 times the income derived from agricultural activities.

In May 2001 the project area was hit by the foot and mouth outbreak, many farmers lost livestock and although compensated had to rebuild farm enterprises those farmers unaffected by culls suffered a worse hardship – unable to sell or move stock due to livestock movement restrictions. The foot and mouth outbreak also highlighted many other problems in the project area including a decline in local abattoirs and the lack of local marketing of produce. The Limestone Country Project was launched at the time that farmers were reassessing their farming/stocking policies. It also came at the time that there was growing consideration of moving agricultural subsidies away from pure production to those supporting enhancements in landscape and wildlife. There is also increased demand for less intensive more sustainable ways of farming, where animals are not transported so far, local markets reduce the dependence on supermarkets and a high quality locally distinctive product is produced.

The Project Area

Project Area – covers major parts of the southern Craven Dales – more specifically SSSI/Natura 2000 sites within the karst areas of Chapel-le-Dale, Ribblesdale, Littondale and Malhamdale. In all it covers over 11,000 ha, and includes 12 habitats regarded as being of European significance.

Two SACS (Natura 2000) notably Craven Limestone Complex SAC which is focussed around Malham Tarn and the Ingleborough Complex SAC whose core is the Ingleborough massif.

The principal habitats are:

- Limestone grasslands – these cover one fifth of the project area – dominated by blue moor grass (*Sesleria albicans*) – lightly grazed situations species such as bloody crane's-bill (*Geranium sanguineum*) and rockrose (*Helianthemum nummularium*), small scabious (*Scabiosa columbaria*) and great burnet (*Sanguisorba officinalis*).
- Limestone pavements a priority habitat – only 3,000 ha of this in the UK of which 1,000 ha in the project area – typically very open, bleached expanses of limestone grazed by hill sheep flocks.
- Limestone flushes – where lime-rich water seeps from underlying limestone rock strata – where purple moor grass (*Molinia caerulea*) dominated often avoided by sheep.
- Limestone scars and cliffs – most inaccessible of habitats but still accessible by sheep - arctic alpiners such as purple saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*).
- Also juniper scrub, blanket bog and purple moorgrass fen meadows.

Management issues

The major issues is the preferential grazing habits of livestock - under agri-environment agreements sheep numbers have been markedly reduced, however the reduced numbers of sheep are still preferentially grazing the sweeter limestone grasslands while the more acidic grasslands are ungrazed and rank. In some cases agri-environment schemes have actually increased this differential grazing response – as stocking levels have been reduced so low that farmers have not found it worthwhile maintaining mixed grazing systems and shifted to sheep only grazing regimes.

Why cattle? – well experience gained through managing National Nature Reserve (NNR) land at sites such as Upper Teesdale NNR and also a number of other wildlife sites being

managed by traditional breeds for their biodiversity (over 200 in the UK) have shown that mixed grazing is a more appropriate regime for many important sites. Cattle can convert low quality forage and much more effectively, they are less selective graziers and generally do not graze areas such as limestone pavements and screes. Native cattle do this even better! – being more adapted to the harsh environment and better suited to converting grass of poor forage value.

The Project in Action

So stepping back a little - a quick trip through the project and how it works on the ground.

Firstly it is worth highlighting that the Project uses whole farm planning mechanisms to achieve overall changes to the farm enterprise – this entails whole farm environmental audits and drawing up of whole farm plans and hence a lot of interaction between nature conservationists and the individual farmers.

The project provides an integrated package of incentives/support to ensure a move to a farming system more appropriate for the local area and hopefully one which is more sustainable in the longer term.

The Project acts in a complementary role to the current agri-environment measures using the existing measures to achieve basic environmental land management. It uses capital grants to underpin fundamental changes to the long-term farm infrastructure, for example to convert buildings and install water supplies and it also utilises a range of transitional payments to convert livestock systems at the whole farm enterprise scale. Grants are provided to purchase animals of the appropriate cattle breeds which include Galloway, blue-grey crosses, Shorthorn, Welsh black, traditional Hereford and Luing.

Scientific Research

We need to demonstrate success and so two large research contracts have been let long at ecological and economic issues. The ecological monitoring includes both project-scale monitoring and small field scale work. A recent extension of the work will include the use of ‘satellite collars’ to be used on cows and sheep so we can get an accurate insight into the preferential grazing habitats of the different animals.

An economic research project has been initiated, which will study the impact on participant farms and will assess how their economic position relates to others in the immediate upland area and across the UK.

The Importance of the Project

So why is this project so important?

Well there is the small matter of the PSA target (The UK government's target to ensure that 95% of all Sites of Special Scientific Interest – which includes all of the Natura 2000 sites- will achieve favourable nature conservation condition by 2010). Agri-environment is not always the whole answer and can agri-environment ever be considered as a long-term sustainable option? We believe that the approach taken through the Limestone Country Project is potentially a more sustainable long-term option which considers environmental, social and economic factors. We hope it will provide an alternative farming enterprise option for some farmers and will show that conservation of the natural environment can go hand in hand with livestock production. Hopefully it will not only deliver favourable nature conservation management but also support viable farm enterprises which are less dependent on agricultural support payments.

Conclusions

And to conclude a few key points and several measures of Local Success:

- We are implementing a locally distinctive scheme which has been tailored to address local conservation management issues and to meet local economic and social objectives. In terms of the exportability to other Natura 2000 areas and the lessons learnt in this project, I would suggest that Natura 2000 have specific management requirements and whereas agri-environment can provide the baseline level of management, locally developed schemes are required to fine-tune management.
- We should be moving away from reliance on CAP payments and/or agri-environment payments and looking at integrated transitional packages of incentives support to ensure that fundamental long-term changes are made to farming systems which are appropriate for local areas.
- The Project has shown successfully how to integrate the various agri-environmental measures and has shown how to add value to the current mechanisms. Interest in the project expressed by DEFRA during early discussions into the Higher Level Scheme (the proposed new English agri-environment measure) and also into national envelopes and we believe has mean the project has been effective at moulding national policy with regards to the need for and ways of supporting cattle enterprises in the uplands of the UK.
- The whole farm planning approach is the way forward. It is only in this way that farmers can fully consider the economic and environmental issues in tandem. Unless we move towards more public ownership of land and or see a dramatic increase in the area of land under charitable ownership, the management of

Nature 2000 will continue to need to be considered under the wider economic climate.

- The Project is part of the wider Craven 'joint working project' between English Nature, Rural Development Service and the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority – this entails one officer representing the other agency of the ground for a suite of farmers to prevent duplication of effort, monitoring, visits etc. The three agencies are working together over the whole of the southern part of the National Park to ensure more efficient implementation of agri-environment through better joint planning and co-ordination of resources.
- Partnerships are often difficult to initiate and often just as difficult to manage – but the benefits are more than worth the effort. In particular there is a need to look at partners wider than the traditional nature conservation bodies and the input and support of the National Beef Association (and also National Farmers Union locally) has been a definite bonus to the project.
- And finally to rap up the story no project like this would be successful in the long term without a market for the project. Although the LIFE funding package would not finance the setting up of a marketing initiative – through use of the National Parks 'Sustainable Development' funds, which are grant aided by DEFRA, we have been able to work with marketing consultants to work with the project farmers to create viable markets within which to sell their beef direct to the consumer. As part of this project we are currently looking into viability of any local project branding. We have also been fortunate to grab the attention and support of the celebrity TV cook, writer, and broadcaster Sophie Grigson, who has already attended and cooked for an evening meal attended by all participating farmers and other key individuals. Our first beef will be for sale by on the internet in autumn 2004

Overall we think that this project and traditional breeds of cattle have an important role in revitalising and diversifying the uplands. This project is founded on 'nature conservation money' and EU LIFE have been happy to financially support a project which they believe will not only result in favourable management of Natura 2000 sites but also provide a wider range of benefits from green tourism to specialist markets to rural employment.