

#RealNewForest

Is commoning profitable?



No. Commoning is a vocational commitment, requiring

people to make a substantial commitment of their own time and money. Most commoning activity is unseen, whether that is the annual rituals of TB testing of cattle, regular checking of grazing stock, hay making for winter fodder, worming, castrating young colts, or halter-breaking each year's foals. The most visible activities are the summer shows, when commoners compete on the quality of their animals, the colt assessments in the Spring, and the Autumn round-ups (known as drifts). All of this, of course, costs money as well as time. Veterinary bills can come randomly and be substantial but essential.

The biggest cost of commoning is probably obtaining and maintaining back-up grazing. The New Forest is the country's most expensive National Park, where grazing land has reached £60,000 an acre. Commoners use a mix of renting, borrowing, and ownership for their essential back-up land. If they have too little for haymaking then they will probably also need to buy in hay or silage for winter fodder, and for other times when their animals are not turned out to graze the New Forest. There is also, of course, a substantial investment in buying and maintaining equipment, whether stock trailers and 4x4s, or tractors and land-management machinery. Without this then the costs of hiring a contractor can mount very quickly.

Checking stock is best done from horseback, and these are essential for the drifts. The costs of horsekeeping, to support commoning activities, can be substantial. Whilst those who get glimpses of commoners riding out checking stock on a sunny day may see this as a "hobby", it certainly does not feel that way at the end of a winter working day or when things go wrong- the need to catch and bring home a sick or injured animal will always come about at the least convenient time.

A huge effort has gone into improving the quality of the animals that graze the New Forest, but a substantial effort is needed if they are to achieve a respectable price when sold. The effort of halter-breaking a pony foal might, for example, add £50 to its value, but will add much more for a commoner's pride at the saleyard. The Commoning Census, repeated each decade, reveals the motivations of commoners: Pride in the New Forest, a desire to be part of the "real" New Forest, and a commitment to sustaining this ancient practice.

The Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) has certainly helped reduce the costs involved in a commitment to commoning, and has done much to achieve the boost to cattle numbers demanded by Natural England. As a Europe-wide scheme the BPS does not, however, require any commitment to commoning. Any farmer who obtains BPS entitlements over the New Forest, can ask the agisters to mark their cattle for the New Forest, and claim over the Rural Payments Agency's "eligible area". The BPS is based solely on this area calculation, giving a fixed amount per hectare, shared amongst however many people claim according to the number of "Livestock Units" marked (A cow is one livestock unit). As a result the Verderers Marking Register increases each year, and the amount a commoner receives for each animal declines. In 2017 this bizarre system produced support of approximately £412 per marked cow and £247 per pony. Additionally, the standard calculation of the "eligible area" is unstable in the context of the New Forest, where livestock graze a much wider variety of habitats than is normal on improved farmlands. This systems and its instability is neither desirable nor sustainable. Support intended for the New Forest should work to the benefit of the New Forest.

Since 2017 the CDA has been working with local partner organisations to press for change – towards a system that improves New Forest habitats, provides the necessary support to commoning, We would like to see a system that uses the current Verderers' Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) Scheme as its starting point, support systems that are locally designed and managed, sympathetic to the New Forest. Most importantly, it must ensure that the common grazing of a mix of livestock remains sustainable within England most expensive National Park, with a challenging mix of high average costs and low average incomes in the local economy.

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