

#RealNewForest

Is the New Forest overgrazed?



Shirley Holms – January 2019

Many people falsely interpret the Verderers' Marking Register as a record of the number of animals actually grazing the Forest. The reality is much more complex, as many of these animals may only briefly, occasionally, or never be turned out to graze.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Basic Payments Scheme (BPS), for example, requires farmers to present the marking fee receipt in order to qualify for basic payment on the animal. It would not make sense to require that these are turned out. It is more important that commoners, the Verderers, and Natural England assess conditions on a local, case by case basis with the welfare of the livestock and the biodiversity of the New Forest uppermost in their decisions. It is unfortunate that the Common Agricultural Policy works in a way that causes this confusion, and the Commoners Defence Association has been working closely with the other major New Forest organisations to lobby for a future support system that is better suited to the unique circumstances of the New Forest. The Basic Payment Scheme has given an important boost to commoning, which was in a very poor state previously, enabling commoners to invest in their holdings, the welfare of their herds, and to achieve the increase in cattle numbers required by Natural England. Despite BPS support, however, commoners must still subsidise their commitment to Forest grazing with income from their "day" jobs, and with their time.

The Marking Register situation was made worse when the Government announced that payments during the years of the transition by the BPS would be based upon a Reference Period, without declaring which years' payments would be used. This strengthened the perverse incentive to mark additional animals in case the current year becomes the basis for several years of payments. If and when the Reference Period is declared the link between the number of animals marked and the payment will be broken. At that point we may have an indication of the true commitment to commoning, given that BPS receipts will have no link to New Forest activity. In February 2020 we [wrote to the Secretary of State](#) calling for an early decision. Our local MPs, the National Park Authority, the Verderers, and Forestry England all supported our lobby for an early decision.

Commoners have a very strong interest in protecting the New Forest. Indeed, we are usually the first to act when damage is done to the habitats that our animals graze. The grass, shrubs, hedges, water sources and trees are all vital to the welfare of our livestock.

As commoners we must judge grazing levels by the condition of our livestock, sustained by what the New Forest provides, and the condition of the habitats supported by grazing. Twice a year the Verderers run a welfare tour, taking national and local organisations with an interest in welfare to random sites to inspect the livestock. Commoners have an individual responsibility for the condition of their animals, and will take them home should they lose condition with no early prospect of improvement. Natural England have responsibility for the condition of the habitats, which are broken down into individual SSSI units. Natural England assesses that of the 29,000 hectares in the [New Forest SSSI](#) just 1.14% are unfavourable and declining. The majority of the 582 SSSI units are in favourable condition some 97% either favourable or unfavourable and recovering. Anyone who takes a moment to study the Natural England assessments will soon discover common reasons amongst those few SSSI units in declining condition, particularly undergrazing, human interference with watercourses, campsite and other human pressures. The most recent assessments also show the benefits of some of the work that has been done under our current agri-environment scheme (known as Pillar II of the Common

The Verderers Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (HLS) for 2010-2020 and its predecessor schemes have played a significant part in this exceptional achievement. The current [Verderers HLS Agreement](#) also includes specific conditions for each habitat type, for example ensuring that there is sufficient soil poaching by cattle to sustain some of the rare breads that survive in the New Forest, of which the [small fleabane](#) is the most cited example given that it has declined catastrophically from being widespread across Britain to near extinction other than its New Forest strongholds. The HLS required the partners to ensure that the proportion of cattle in the Forest's stock was increased in order to maximise the biodiversity potential from grazing.

The New Forest pony too is now a rare breed and it is vital that pony numbers are kept at levels that provide sufficient foals to maintain disappearing bloodlines.

In 2020, following CDA representations on the marking register, Julian Lewis MP asked ministers for a statement on New Forest grazing levels. On [11th May](#) the agriculture minister, Victoria Prentis MP, responded:

Natural England recently recommended that the Environmental Stewardship Higher Level agreement with the Verderers should be extended by one year as the agreement was delivering its objectives and the Sites of Special Scientific Interest within the forest were being managed in a way that improved their condition. We are not aware of damage to landscape due to increased numbers of de-pastured cattle.....

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