October 2011

AONB PARTNERSHIP POSITION STATEMENT

The management of the Sandlings heaths

The AONB Partnership
The Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB was designated as a protected landscape in March 1970. The AONB Partnership was set up in 1993 to ensure efficient and co-ordinated management of the AONB. It is made up of 26 organisations, who work together to conserve and enhance the designated landscape.

Background
The Sandlings take their name from a narrow band of light, sandy soils that run roughly north-south from Southwold to the eastern fringe of Ipswich. Most of the Sandlings heaths lie within the AONB. The soil was mostly formed from material washed out from the ice sheet during the last ice age. As the ice retreated and the climate slowly warmed, the Sandlings landscape became wooded. Over thousands of years people gradually cleared the trees and grazed their animals on the land. This together with grazing by wild animals prevented the regrowth of the trees and shrubs, leading to a more open landscape, not unlike the countryside we see today. Farmers were able to grow crops on the land, but the nutrients in the free-draining soil were quickly exhausted, forcing people to move to new areas. Plants that we think of today as heathland species gradually colonised these areas, thriving in the more open landscape.

Perhaps as long as 4,000 years ago, large expanses of heathland had already developed in this area, a patchwork of grassland, gorse, scattered trees and heather. Grazing intensified with the introduction of sheep, around 1,000 years ago, and dominated farming in the Sandlings until comparatively recently. The Domesday Book records very little woodland in the Sandlings. While the Sandlings heaths may seem like a natural landscape they were actually created by people. This is a landscape without ancient woodland (tree and woodland clearance continued until the 17th century), but there are some isolated and very significant exceptions: the magnificent and ancient trees in the former hunting forest of Staverton Park and the remnants of Sudbourne Great Wood are woodland gems in our landscape.

In the last century, the Sandlings heaths have changed dramatically. Modern farming methods, commercial forestry, military use and urban development have all brought change to the Sandlings and much of the area's heaths have been lost. Coupled with twentieth century changes in agriculture, a profound change to the character of the Sandlings came with the establishment of the Forestry Commission's Sandlings forests (Rendlesham, Tunstall and Dunwich) from the 1920s onwards.

The sandy, free-draining acidic soils allowed the development of a characteristic heathland flora, variously dominated by heathers, acid grassland or lichens. Over millennia a distinct fauna became associated with the open heathland habitats. Characteristic and now very rare reptiles, insects and bird species such as adder, silver-studded blue butterfly and nightjar made this habitat their own. These species and others associated with heathland often occur in no other habitat and their conservation is now a national priority. Heathland is as important for wildlife as it is beautiful to look at so, to maintain this vital and historic landscape and to conserve the habitat, careful management is essential and grazing has been successfully reintroduced in some areas. Fortunately, the ecological value of the heaths is now well understood and all the significant remaining fragments of the Sandlings are now protected and under some form of conservation management.

Heathland area
In the UK, there are estimated to be 58,000 hectares (ha) (143,000 acres) of lowland heathland today. This is about 20% of the total world resource. About 55% of the UK resource (c. 31,900 ha) is found in England, where only 1/6th of the heathland present in 1800 now remains[1].

[1] UK Lowland Heathland HAP
http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110303145213/http://ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=15

By contrast the extent of broadleaf woodland in the UK is estimated at 1,355,000 ha[2] (c 3.3 million acres) of which 552,000ha is ancient woodland, 341,000ha of which is in England, of which 206,000ha is ancient semi-natural woodland and 135,000ha is plantation on ancient woodland sites[3].

In the Sandlings about 2,000ha of heathland remains (c3% of the UK resource). This 2,000ha area is less than 8% of what once existed. Indeed from 1932-1983 over 80% of Sandlings heaths were lost, largely to forestry, agriculture, buildings and military bases. There are 42 Sandlings heathland sites remaining, ranging in size from 247ha at Minsmere and Walberswick to fragments under 2ha[4]. Following the Second World War neglect posed the main threat to the Sandlings heaths, exacerbated by the decimation of the rabbit population following the spread of myxomatosis. This led to rapid encroachment by trees and scrub. In the Sandlings (1986) only 38% of heaths were dominated by true heathland communities. Of the remaining heathland areas 16% disappeared to woodland, 13% to scrub and 33% were dominated by dense bracken stands.

A partnership approach

For nearly 30 years conservation bodies, local authorities, parish councils and private landowners in the Sandlings have been working with a shared objective to promote the conservation, restoration and re-creation of lowland heath and increase public awareness and support for this special landscape. In 2010 a heathland creation strategy, for the period 2010-2030, was finalised by the Sandlings group concentrating on the AONB's four 'heathland hotspots' of Dunwich, Minsmere to Snape, Tunstall and Rendlesham/South Sandlings. In short the group's 2030 vision includes:

- Increasing the area of heathland through improving degraded sites and through the creation of new sites and other key associated habitats
- Linking priority heathland sites and associated habitats by working in partnership with a variety of landowners and managers
- Improving people's understanding and appreciation of the importance of heathland and its wildlife
- Improving the effective and sustainable management of heathland, particularly through grazing
- Maintaining, improving and expanding heathland fragments where opportunities arise, to link 10 small sites and create an additional 50 hectares.

Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Partnership's view

1. Lowland heathland is a vital component of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths. It is a fundamental part of what defines the AONB and what makes it distinctive from other areas. Heathland, together with the coast and estuaries, are the key, distinctive, characteristics that led to the area's national protection as AONB.
2. The AONB Partnership supports the work of a wide variety of landowners in their endeavours to manage, restore and re-create internationally scarce heathland.
3. Following the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) 2000, all Sandlings heaths are now dedicated as Open Access Land. The Sandlings forests are also dedicated for the same. As such many heathland sites, or former heathland sites that may be restored in the future, are often well used for recreation, some even cited as public amenity sites - particularly in the south Sandlings and Ipswich fringes.
4. Increased access to heathland and forest, the degree to which people are now engaged with the natural world and the fact that local people often have a strong sense of ownership over "their patch" (regardless of land ownership) brings added responsibility to heathland managers and users. Local people and responsible users of heathland sites should be given every opportunity to engage with, and influence, management decisions particularly where significant habitat change is planned.
5. Heathland restoration can bring particular challenges, and local people may perceive removal of trees on former heathland sites as damaging woodland clearance. On publicly-owned & amenity land an open dialogue between heathland owners/managers and local people will be important in overcoming misunderstandings, on both sides, and better informing management decisions.
6. A mosaic of heathland and trees is often the best solution for people and wildlife. It is important to stress that heathland restoration usually only means the removal of a proportion of tree cover.
7. Perceptions of heathland management are also important to address. Local users of sites where major restoration is planned are likely to be resistant to that restoration, where management of existing heathland on the site is sub-optimal. It is important that effective heathland management is seen to take place alongside restoration, lest it become impossible to sell the heathland vision.

[2] http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forstats2011.nsf/LUContents/061E41873F94CC788025735D0034F33B
[3] http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forstats2011.nsf/LUContents/1874A4D10670E9948025734C0048DAA5
[4] http://www.suffolkbiodiversity.org/content/suffolkbiodiversity.org/PDFs/action-plans/lowlandheathland.pdf