

Northern Devon Nature Improvement Area Summary of progress for NE website To December 2013



Objective 1: Develop a more robust and coherent Torridge catchment ecosystem

Landowners working with the NIA have, to date, restored 1199 ha of culm grassland and other grassland habitats, 92 km of hedgerow and 28 ha of undermanaged broadleaved woodland. Most restoration has been achieved through grant schemes on private land: 13 Higher Level Stewardship schemes, 15 capital works schemes, 28 ELS / OELS schemes, 16 England Woodland Grant Schemes, and small capital grants from Devon County Council and the Environment Agency. The NIA has initiated 36.2 ha of wetland re-creation (change of land use) and 33 ha of woodland planting

We have reinstated favourable grazing on 74 Culm grassland sites, and improved site condition using the Devon Wildlife Trust machinery ring in 49 cases. The project team re-assessed the condition of 35 County Wildlife Sites and identified 8 new potential sites.

During 2013 the NIA established a better picture of the status of our two key species. Survey of marsh fritillary butterflies and web counts revealed healthy populations on the majority of previous sites, plus four new sites found. Survey of known freshwater pearl mussel sites revealed more individuals than previously thought, but none of them below about 50 years old. Evidence suggests no breeding is occurring.

Objective 2: Realise the Torridge catchment ecosystem's potential to deliver high quality ecosystem services

Through working with landowners the NIA has so far positively influenced land management adjacent to 76 km of the river Torridge, already exceeding our 2015 target. This work helps to manage flood risk and water quality in addition to increasing biodiversity.

The Proof of Concept research project, a partnership between Devon Wildlife Trust and Exeter University, has found that Culm grassland is up to five times more effective than intensive grassland at holding water.

Using Environment Agency funding, the NIA has purchased 2 new soil aerators to lend to landowners. These machines are designed to manage improved pastures by relieving soil compaction and allowing water, oxygen and nutrients to penetrate deeper into the soil, so reducing runoff and subsequent pollution. Takeup by landowners so far has been very positive.

Working with Natural England's Catchment Sensitive Farming programme, our water resources advisor has targeted Water Framework Directive priority sub-catchments to the south of the NIA for resource protection advice and Catchment Sensitive Farming grants.

Objective 3: Enable communities to understand and value the role of nature in delivering a range of ecosystem services, through active participation and engagement

17 school groups have so far been taken out on site to experience the natural environment at first hand, including use of the new DWT reserve at Meeth, visits to farms, and work with 'Giants in the Forest' on the Tarka Trail. Primary school curriculum materials on ecosystem services are now

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being trialled by schools across the NIA. The NIA hosted three full time six-month undergraduate placements from Plymouth University during 2013, developing strong connections with their Conservation Biology course and many relevant fieldwork projects which have complemented the NIA's work.

The NIA team has delivered 99 community events so far, including walks, talks, agricultural shows and fairs focusing on the many important aspects of the NIA. A number of different activities have been developed for these audiences. Over 70% of the NIA area has now been covered by 39 Parish Biodiversity Audits through our work with Devon Biodiversity Records Centre. Followup work is underway with 9 parishes so far. We are helping to establish 2 community woodlands.

A Devon theatre company, Burn the Curtain, were commissioned by Beaford Arts to develop a new show for families on their local environment, 'The Bureau of Extraordinance Survey,' held in Buckland Brewer and Shebbear during autumn 2013. This, and another show in development, will be rolled out to other NIAs across the country during 2014 and 2015.

Five Citizen Science projects and 16 biodiversity volunteer tasks have been held so far, including hedge laying, invasive parrot's feather clearance, survey and water quality monitoring. Over 2,500 volunteer hours have been recorded so far.

In 2013 Exeter University delivered a study on Cultural Ecosystem Services in three NIA parishes, Hatherleigh, Meeth and Merton, with a questionnaire to residents followed up by workshops on positive and negative perceptions and aspects of the local environment.

Objective 4: Provide an integrated and co-ordinated advisory service to landowners

The NIA team continues to exceed targets for landowner advisory visits every quarter. By the end of December 2013 the NIA had undertaken 499 site visits to 171 different farms, covering approximately 14% of the Torridge catchment. NIA advisory staff use and develop a 'first stop shop' approach to integrated advice, including signposting to other specialist advisors when required. The advisors have developed good working relationships with landowners from initial visits through to grant applications, practical work and maintenance of benefits.

The NIA has delivered 14 habitat management and restoration workshops and 5 resource protection workshops. Most have been well attended by landowners, and topics have ranged from deer management to swailing to specialist machinery use and soil protection.

To date the NIA has raised an estimated £2.9 million for environmental improvements by landowners through grant schemes, with more in the 'pipeline'.

The NIA's Culm Advisors' Group has proved to be a good mechanism to share experience and information, and stimulate debate, between land use advisors. The NIA has also run workshops and training for advisors including water quality training from EA and County Wildlife Site assessment from Devon Biodiversity Records Centre.

Objective 5: Realise the benefits of ecosystem services by supporting supply and demand in local markets

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As with much of England, nearly 60% of the NIA's woodland is undermanaged. Good woodland management and subsequent marketing of woodland products, such as woodfuel, will bring benefits to the local economy and improve local biodiversity. To date 113 advisory visits to woodland have been completed to 78 different holdings, and the NIA has approximately 33 ha of woodland in the grants 'pipeline'. We are also supporting DCC's Ward Forester initiative to bring woodlands back into management through promoting local agents to bring small woodland owners together.

With Devon Hedge Group, we are investigating the connections between hedgerow management and woodfuel, and whether this could be economically viable.

The NIA has delivered 6 woodland management and woodfuel events for landowners, with more planned for 2014 and 2015.

The Forestry Commission has provided training for advisors and partners on the Woodland Carbon Code, but suitable woodland planting projects of over 10ha have not yet been achieved.

Damage from grey squirrels poses a serious threat to the viability of establishing productive woodlands in the NIA, alongside deer damage. A Plymouth University undergraduate is undertaking a study on the extent of squirrel damage across the area.