

South Downs Way Ahead Nature Improvement Area

In February 2012 the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) was awarded £608,000 by the Secretary of State for the Environment towards a £3 million plan to protect, restore and reconnect endangered chalk downland in the National Park.

The South Downs Way Ahead Project brings together 29 organisations, led by the (SDNPA), to trail blaze the Government's new Nature Improvement Area (NIA) scheme to protect wildlife habitats and the environmental, economic and social benefits they bring.



Chalk downland is vital to the survival of rare and endangered wildlife and is relied on by millions of people in and around the South Downs National Park to provide clean drinking water and valuable green space. This project aims to protect and enhance this precious habitat by working with a wide range of people and organisations. The project area is shown in blue on the map.

Through the South Downs Way Ahead Partnership, farmers, community groups, government bodies, research organisations, charities and local businesses are working together to join up vital areas of chalk downland along the famous South Downs Way National Trail.

All 29 partners within the NIA are engaged in various projects to deliver the aims of the NIA. The partners have achieved a great deal in the first year and a half of the project. The projects listed give a flavour of the work being undertaken.

SDNPA

We have restored nearly 1,000 hectares of chalk grassland habitat across the five focal areas of Winchester, Harting, Worthing, Brighton & Hove and Eastbourne. Staff and volunteers have collected and propagated local chalk grassland seed, which has contributed to the re-establishment of chalk grassland plants at project sites. This work has helped support and increase populations of invertebrates and other wildlife. We have already seen the success of this habitat restoration work, for example during 2013 there were many more sightings of the rare and endangered Duke of Burgundy butterfly in the project area.

We are working in partnership with the Environment Agency, South East Water, Southern Water and Portsmouth Water to reduce the levels of nitrate entering groundwater bodies from soil drainage. This will improve the ecological richness and diversity of local wildlife sites and will also improve water quality in the area.

We are developing a Visitor Payback Scheme for externally organised events run along the South Downs Way. The revenue generated from this scheme will contribute to the conservation and enhancement of wildlife habitats along the South Downs Way.

Partners

Brighton & Hove City Council has submitted a bid for an area in and around Brighton (including parts of the NIA) to be awarded Biosphere status. NIA projects contributing towards this bid have involved creating biodiversity hubs and corridors, promoting the benefits of green roofs, establishing conservation grazing on urban chalk grassland sites and creating new areas of chalk grassland through seed collection, propagation and plug planting.

Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust is restoring chalk grassland in the Itchen Valley and Downs area near Winchester through conservation grazing using traditional breeds such as British White and Dexter cattle. A local market for meat and other produce derived from this conservation grazing scheme is being established. They are also developing a volunteering programme to promote engagement of local communities with chalk downlands and other wildlife-rich habitats.

Lewes District Council is improving areas of chalk grassland in and around Lewes through conservation grazing by sheep. They are planning a series of events to engage with the local communities and promote the social, health and wellbeing benefits to be gained from the natural habitats of the South Downs.

The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew has a range of NIA projects including developing chalk grassland seed collection, preservation and propagation techniques and establishing and sustaining populations of rare chalk grassland plants such as frog, man and musk orchids.

The RSPB, in conjunction with the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, has been working with farmers and land managers to increase farmland bird populations across the project area. A series of farm education days have been held to promote the benefits of ecosystems services in terms of health and wellbeing, cultural heritage and provisioning resources derived from the South Downs to urban and rural communities.

Sussex and Hampshire Biodiversity Records Centres have been conducting surveys of chalk grassland flora and fauna across the project area and recording the data as part of the ongoing monitoring and evaluation element of the project.

Sussex Wildlife Trust and Lewes & Ouse Valley Eco-nomics Group have held a series of workshops, events and walks for the Lewes community to help them develop an understanding of the links between the Lewes local economy and the ecosystems from which they benefit.



Bee orchid



Duke of Burgundy



Drinking water from the
South Downs



Grazing urban chalk grassland sites
in and around Brighton



Grey Partridge



Round headed Rampion
(chalk grassland species)



Birds Foot Trefoil
(chalk grassland species)