



➤ Sheep grazing above Widecombe, on Dartmoor

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➤ Peatland bog restoration work on Dartmoor SWPP

Management of Dartmoor sites needs urgent reform



➤ Ancient stone circles on Dartmoor National Park, near Chagford

Olivier Vergnault

REVIEW chairman David Fursdon and his panel are to be congratulated on the timely production of their detailed and impressive report, which reviews protected site management on Dartmoor. At last we have an official document which reinforces what the Dartmoor community has known for more than 25 years – that the policies and actions of Natural England have been, at best, inappropriate and, at worst, damaging to the commons of Dartmoor.

Reading between the lines of the polite language, it is a remarkably hard-hitting report. In the words of the chairman: ‘The way Dartmoor is managed needs to change radically and urgently’. Natural England has been the dominant negative influence, and must completely change its approach to Dartmoor, but the Dartmoor Commoners’ Council is also criticised for its lack of ‘effectiveness’.

A strong defence is made for the continuing presence of sheep, cattle and ponies grazing the moors, and for the right of skilled Dartmoor farmers to continue producing live-

Former chairman of the Dartmoor Society and cultural environmentalist **Tom Greeves** gives his views on the findings of an independent review of the management of Dartmoor’s protected areas

stock for the benefit of the nation. In particular, ‘Dartmoor needs more cattle’ to combat the spread of *Molinia* grass.

The panel’s remit was to look at Sites of Special Scientific Interest, the two largest of which were designated only for nature conservation or geological criteria as long ago as 1952 (not 1989 as the report states), and it is refreshing that they have recommended that the very concept of SSSIs should be reviewed, in order to be ‘compatible with the concept of a landscape delivering a ‘mosaic’ of public benefits’. Although not explicitly stated, this opens the door for a radical rethink of land management, balancing culture and nature. It is also good that sheep are recognised as being beneficial for both cultural heritage and biodiversity. The suggestion that wood pasture should be

encouraged is welcome too.

However, there is one aspect of the report that is disturbing, namely the statement that ‘The absolute top priority for Dartmoor is improving its hydrology and rewetting its blanket bogs’ and this must be challenged. The panel has clearly been seduced by the language of the South West Peatland Partnership and have not looked beyond the pronouncements of involved academics and scientists.

No evidence has yet been produced to show that the condition of peat on Dartmoor is degrading compared to its condition 50, 100, 200 or 500 years ago. Peat has been exploited in the past, but the growth of sphagnum in pre-existing pools can be seen across the moor, and the revegetating of bare peat with grassland in the past fifty years such as on Cut Hill, without any direct human

intervention, is remarkable.

The panel may not have had a chance to read the report dated 10 November by Pia Benaud and Naomi Gatis of the University of Exeter titled ‘Results from peatland restoration’ (IUCN Peatland Programme Newsletter Winter 2023). This quantifies monitoring at Flat Tor Pan between 2012 and 2018. Despite work done by expensive and intrusive machines there has been ‘minimal impact on both fluvial and gaseous carbon exports’ and the creation of numerous pools has ‘led to an increase of methane emissions’. Methane is eighty times more damaging than carbon as a potential climate-changing gas. Thousands of pools have now been created across Dartmoor, mostly without any monitoring of methane emissions.

Moreover, despite a promise at a public event in Okehampton in November 2021 (Dartmoor Society Newsletter 70), and a written request since, no quantification of the carbon footprint of the rewetting projects since 2009 has yet been produced. Might it be possible that

the millions of pounds spent on ‘rewetting’ peat on Dartmoor has contributed more to global warming than ameliorated it?

Natural England will be reeling from the Fursdon report. It begs the question as to why Natural England, with only ‘one and a half advisers’ and limited funds, could ever have been given such authoritarian powers regarding Dartmoor, and to have had such a damaging influence not only on the landscape but on hill-farming culture as a whole.

Reform is urgently needed. It is probably wishful thinking to imagine that Natural England will be given sufficient funds and staff to rise to the task ahead. This is probably why the panel suggests the creation of a Land-use Management Group. If this has a brief to embrace holistically biodiversity and culture in equal measure then there is some hope for the future of Dartmoor’s commons. SSSIs, managed by Natural England, are no longer an appropriate protective measure for Dartmoor. The Fursdon report sets this out unequivocally. Let us hope that good outcomes will now follow.