

Review of the Exmoor Mire Restoration Project

The aim of the Exmoor Mire Restoration Project (EMRP) 2006-2010 was to restore the natural hydrology of degraded blanket bogs on Exmoor by blocking up the network of old drainage ditches. The EMRP Steering Group commissioned this research to undertake an external and independent review of peat land restoration work on Exmoor to date and to help guide future activity for the new Mires on the Moor project.

Primary data was collected through consultations and interviews with 60 experts, land managers and stakeholders using in-depth, semi-structured interviews and a stakeholder workshop. The research also involved a review of existing data held by the EMRP and a review of 22 UK peat land restoration projects, highlighting examples of best practice.

Key findings from the review were:

Ditch blocking - The EMRP has developed a good understanding of ditch blocking techniques most appropriate to Exmoor and almost doubled its original target for ditch blocking.

Biodiversity - Extensive vegetation monitoring by the EMRP has revealed an increase in the abundance and richness of plant species associated with wetter conditions brought about by ditch blocking. Aquatic invertebrates have also benefitted from increased pools of water.

Hydrology - Limited resources and difficulties encountered with the hydrological monitoring equipment impacted on the quality of hydrological data obtained. Analysis of the dipwell data by the Project Officer and visual observations revealed a rise in the water table at Exe Head since 1998, with a less evident rise in the water table at Blackpitts. To date, changing flow patterns have not been analysed so the impact of ditch blocking on downstream flows is unclear. Lessons learnt from EMRP hydrological monitoring have been incorporated into a new and comprehensive hydrological monitoring plan which has been reviewed and endorsed by UK academics.



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Historic Environment - The actual extent of the impacts on the historic environment resulting from mire restoration activity is difficult to ascertain; to a great extent concern has been, and continues to be, about the potential for damage. Recommendations focused on the need to continue integrating the historic environment into all aspects of project activity.

Landscape - No major concerns about the long-term, landscape-scale impact of the project on the Exmoor moorland landscape were identified, although a number of minor visual impacts were observed.

Access - Project procedures are in place to consider recreational access issues on each proposed site. Some limited access restrictions for the hunt due to mire restoration were identified but, overall, the impact on access for recreationalists was low. Landowners were concerned about public liability issues on mire restoration sites and required some legal clarification.

Agriculture - The impact of mire restoration on farm management varied; for some it improved grassland quality; for others it ran in conjunction with their agri-environment scheme and had little impact, whilst others saw it as reducing the long-term agricultural quality of their land with inadequate compensation. Some specific concerns related to possible hindrance to general farming access and stock-checking and increases in ticks and liver fluke.

Communication - The EMRP achieved widespread promotional press coverage, but was less effective at communicating and engaging with the local community, resulting in some local concerns and misunderstandings about the project. Ideas for future potential communication mechanisms were proposed by stakeholders.

Education - Educational outreach was not one of the original objectives of the EMRP; nevertheless the Project Officer has spent some time on educational visits in order to further the understanding of the project. At a national level the EMRP has contributed to the understanding of peat land restoration through presentations and national reports. More locally the educational impact has been limited and the review presents ideas as to how the educational benefits of the project can be enhanced.

Local community involvement - The EMRP has used volunteers to help with project activities and has focused on using local contractors to construct ditch blocks and cut bales, although there are relatively few contractors available locally to undertake this specialist work.

Governance and decision-making - Some stakeholders felt excluded from the decision-making process and thought their views should be incorporated into the project. The proposed governance structure for the new Mires on Moors project offers opportunities for more inclusive decision-making incorporating an Advisory Board of local representatives who will give strategic direction to the project and a Project Delivery Group with a responsibility for project management.

The review concluded that the EMRP has achieved a substantial amount of ditch blocking on Exmoor within a short period. It suggested that lessons learnt from the EMRP will provide a firm basis on which to develop and implement the larger and more ambitious Mires on the Moors project. To provide guidance in the development of the new project, 49 recommendations were presented covering all aspects of project activity.

Details of the final report can be found at:
http://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/123372/mires_review_final_report.pdf

