Heathland management at the local and landscape scale:

a SWOT analysis of the perspective of multiple stakeholders

Alexander Lovegrove, Phillipa Gillingham, Mark Brisbane, Adrian Newton, John Stewart, & Anita Diaz
Bournemouth University BH12 5BB, UK.
alovegrove@bournemouth.ac.uk

Bournemouth University

Background

Lowland heathlands are anthropogenic in western Europe and management is therefore required for its continued survival. Despite well established management practices, there are many existing and future challenges that will need to be overcome to safeguard this habitat into the future. Management approaches and concerns may vary over different scales, and different concerns and interests may change how management is carried out place to place, all of which can have an impact on the effectiveness of conservation efforts.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

We used a SWOT analysis to investigate what heathland managers and other stakeholders considered to be the most important issues they face - and to investigate whether these change over different spatial scales and with specific interests. This approach enables us to examine where management is perceived to be succeeding, and areas where improvement is needed.

Ecology and Archaeology

One important feature of many UK heathlands is the widespread presence of significant archaeological features. In order to investigate whether management of these concerns conflicted or complemented ecological management, we also included discussion of management for archaeological features.

Figure 1 (Above) Heathland sites are home to many rare species, such as the smooth snake *Coronella austriaca* (top), Silver-studded blue *Plejebus argus* (middle) and Keeled Skimmer *Orthetrum coerulescens* (bottom).

Figure 2 (left) Important archaeological features, such as this bronze-age barrow, are present on many heathland areas in the southern UK.

Methods & Results

We used two rounds of surveying to gather data. Selecting managers, stakeholders, local and regional experts we invited participation in a survey which open-endedly asked which issues heathlands were facing with SWOT and on archaeological issues. This has been followed up with an online survey, rating the strength of importance for extracted concerns. The top-rated issues in each category are presented below:

Strengths

- Management and habitat techniques are well established, with many techniques used to create the right conditions for wildlife, diversity in the vegetation, and replicate the past environment.
- Many conservation organisations are increasingly working together to improve management and knowledge about these habitats & form coherent strategies

Weaknesses

- Very high fragmentation This can also affect the preservation of archaeology and archaeological features as well, resulting from increased visitor density on areas, increased stock density, and difficulty in removing invasive or problem species.
- Monitoring and knowledge of trends is difficult and lacking in many areas, for both archaeology and ecology

Opportunities

- Wider public engagement to educate and inform the public about the value and man-made history of these locations
- Holistic approach, including archaeology and recreation, could help to pool resources for management and monitoring
- Ecologically driven policies, such as using recreation to replicate past disturbances to heathland areas

Threats

- Unstable funding – how will we find alternative sources
- Potential for reduced Statutory protection
- Grazing issues: could sites be overgrazed in the future, or not grazed enough?

Implications

Our results underlie previous discussions about heathland management, supporting the ideas that current techniques are considered to be well established. Two themes emerged: one scientific, where improved monitoring and ecologically driven policy may bring rewards in future, and the other cultural— how the habitat is valued by the public and in society in general (which has implications for funding and protection as well). We also found that conservation organisations are increasingly co-ordinating their actions, and that there was openness to this continuing into the future—including incorporating archaeological management with ecological management.

Analysis of our results is still ongoing, and we hope to determine whether there are important differences in those managers working on individual sites compared to those working over larger areas. The results from this survey are intended to help aid scientists in targeting research where it may be most relevant, and therefore influential, to heathland practitioners and managers. For future research we intend to expand the geographical scope to study whether similar concerns are expressed across European heaths.

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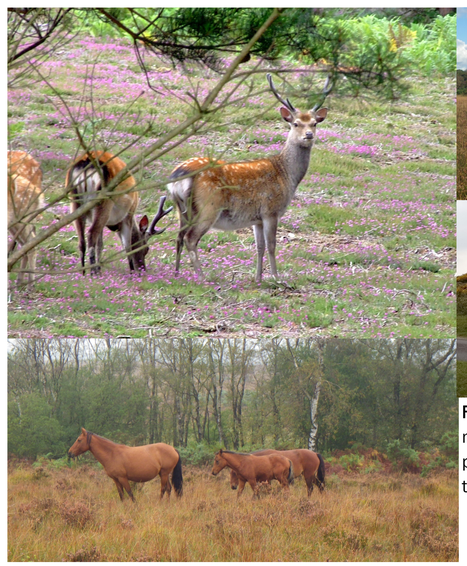

Figure 3 Naturalised, wild and domestic grazing animals play an important role on heathlands. Will this change in the future?