

## **North Merseyside Biodiversity Action Plan**

### **Lowland Heathland Habitat Action Plan**

#### **1. Current status**

##### **1.1 National**

1.1.1 Lowland heath is characterised by dwarf shrubs, such as heather, dwarf gorses and cross-leaved heath. It usually occurs below 300 metres. Habitats such as acid grassland, scrub and woodland form part of heathland but dwarf shrubs such as heather dominate.

1.1.2 Lowland heath is a priority for nature conservation because it is a rare and threatened habitat. The UK has some 58,000 ha of lowland heath of which 55% is found in England. Only one sixth of the heathland present in England in 1800 now remains. The UK has an important proportion (about 20%) of the international total of this habitat.

##### **1.2 Local**

1.2.1 There are no estimates of the total area, distribution, status and condition of lowland heath for North Merseyside. However, a recent survey has been completed and data require analysis.

1.2.2 North Merseyside has two lowland heath sites designated as SSSI: Freshfield Dune Heath; Ainsdale Sand Dunes. There are many other sites on the Sefton Coast dunes. Lowland heath can be found in each district, on sandstone outcrops in Liverpool, Knowsley and St Helens, on derelict land with acid soils in Liverpool and St Helens, on former mosslands in Knowsley and St Helens.

1.2.3 Heather is widely distributed (but not common), and cross-leaved heath, bell heather and Western gorse are now all extremely rare.

##### **1.3 Legal**

1.3.1 Lowland heathland is a priority habitat in the UK BAP.

1.3.2 A large proportion of lowland heathland is notified as SSSI.

1.3.3 Dune heath is afforded priority habitat status on Annex 1 of the EC Habitats Directive.

#### **2. Current Factors causing loss or decline**

##### **2.1 National**

2.1.1 The main factors affecting heathland are:

- Tree and scrub invasion
- Loss of vegetation structure due to a lack of conservation management such as light grazing, controlled burning and cutting

- Nutrient enrichment, particularly droppings from intensively farmed cows, pigs and sheep, or from other sources, e.g. fires. Such enrichment can encourage the invasion of birch, gorse, bracken etc.
- Fragmentation of habitat and disturbance of soils from developments such as housing and road constructions
- Agricultural improvement including reclamation and overgrazing particularly in Northern Ireland

##### **2.2 Local**

2.2.1 The major factors affecting heathland in North Merseyside include national factors and also include local factors specific to this area:

- Habitat loss and fragmentation is frequent, particularly on the Sefton Coast and on the mosslands in Knowsley and St Helens
- Lack of management of the remaining fragments results in scrub invasion and changes in heather growth
- Increased nutrients from dogs and tipping of garden waste
- Varied land ownership resulting in different or lack of management on heath
- Burning, particularly accidental burns can severely damage heaths and any burning can decimate reptile populations and their habitats. Such burning is often linked to recreation
- Invasive plants, such as pine, birch, Rhododendron, Japanese knotweed, giant hogweed and garden plants, may cause problems in heath and mossland sites
- Catastrophic losses of heathland have occurred in the international (western Europe), national and local contexts due to a number of factors relating to change in land use, particularly housing development, agricultural improvement and coniferous afforestation.

#### **3. Current Action**

##### **3.1 National**

3.1.1 By March 1994 over 9,400 ha of lowland heath were included in Countryside Stewardship schemes. Many other sites were included within EN's National Lowland Heathland Programme. The Forestry Commission is promoting heathland regeneration in plantations.

3.1.2 The Lowland Heathland Management Handbook published by EN gives clear guidance on lowland heathland management.

3.1.3 EN's Wildlife Enhancement Scheme and Reserve Enhancement Scheme support management for lowland heathland on SSSIs.

### **3.2 Local**

3.2.1 At least 9 heath sites are protected through Unitary Development Plans as local sites for nature conservation. Two sites in Knowsley are listed as Country Parks, Pex Hill and Halewood Triangle. Bold Moss (St Helens) and Halewood Triangle (Knowsley) have been identified for Local Nature Reserve designation.

3.2.2 SSSI review on the Sefton Coast is underway and areas of dune heath are being considered for inclusion. Review should be complete by 2001.

3.2.3 Management plans or management guidance are in place for the majority of the larger well-known heathland sites.

3.2.4 Dune heath plants and invertebrate survey undertaken. Digital dune heath habitat mapping undertaken.

### **4. Key Species**

4.1 Invertebrates are important on dune heaths. Recent survey on the Sefton Coast identified 3 Red Data Book species (nationally rare) and 22 nationally scarce species.

4.2 Dune heath is an important habitat for Sand Lizards.

### **5. Objectives and Targets**

5.1 The main objective is to maintain in favourable condition the current extent of heathland and to expand the extent of heath where opportunities exist.

5.2 Expand area of lowland heath by:

- Enhancement of quality and extent of heathland where small patches of heather occur, e.g. on derelict land
- Recreation of another 10% heath by 2015
- Initiate restoration on 50% of degraded heaths by 2010 and all of it 2015
- Link small patches into larger heathland units.

5.3 Ensure all heaths are well managed by 2015.

### **6. Proposed actions**

#### **6.1 Policy**

6.1.1 Ensure targets in Mersey Forest Plan reflect BAP targets for North Merseyside and Cheshire. (High Priority) MF/ EAS

6.1.2 Complete SSSI Review by 2001 and ensure lowland heath sites are included. (High Priority) EN

6.1.3 Seek policy in unitary development plans for protection of heath from development. (High Priority) LA/ EAS

6.1.4 Complete cSAC review by 2001 and ensure that lowland heath sites are included. (High Priority) EN

#### **6.2 Site safeguard**

6.2.1 Oppose loss of habitat through development. (High Priority) LA/ EAS

6.2.2 Achieve SSSI designation of priority dune heath on the Sefton Coast. (High Priority) EN

#### **6.3 Land Management**

6.3.1 Ensure management plans for all sites are prepared or reviewed, and implementation begins by 2002. (High Priority) EN/ NT/ LA/ Landowners

6.3.2 Ensure that key management tasks are undertaken on a regular basis. Key tasks are:

- Clear scrub where invasion has created more than a desirable area for the site and maintain this target area.
- Discourage within site fragmentation and adverse edge effects.
- Actively promote use of 'poop-scoop' areas where dog use is unconstrained
- Control horse-riding and mountain bikes so only permitted bridleways and cycle routes are used
- Fire-breaking and fire management/access plans for use by local fire brigades
- Heather management

6.3.3 Agree guidelines for selection of appropriate sites for heath recreation and expansion and choose sites by 2001. (Medium priority) MF/ LA/ EAS

6.3.4 Ensure that favourable condition of all priority dune heath is achieved by 2015.

#### **6.4 Advisory**

6.4.1 Continue working relationships with landowners on the Sefton Coast to enable implementation of management plans. (High Priority) SCP

6.4.2 Ensure landowners and managers are aware of the location, conservation significance

and management requirements of heathland by 2002. (High Priority) EN/ LA

6.4.3 Control and eradicate invasive species from heaths. (High Priority) EN/ NT/ Land managers

6.4.4 Promote and encourage the use of appropriate financial incentive schemes such as the Wildlife Enhancement Scheme and Countryside Stewardship to bring heathland into management. (Medium Priority) EN/ DEFRA/ SCP

6.4.5 Promote links with other lowland heathland managers. (Low Priority) NT/ EN/ LA

## **6.5 Future Research and monitoring**

6.5.1 Collate and analyse data on heath area, location and quality by 2001 and prepare digital database. (High Priority) LA/ EAS

6.5.2 Extend survey of invertebrates to sites in addition to dune heath. (Medium Priority) LA/ LWT

6.5.3 Establish monitoring on sites where programmes are not in place. Continue monitoring where already established. (Low Priority) Landowners/ LA/ LWT

6.5.4 Promote further survey and research on all aspects of the nature conservation value and ecology of the heathland sites. (Low Priority) LA/ SCP

## **6.6 Communications and publicity**

6.6.1 Raise public awareness and understanding of the significance of the remaining heathland fragments and their management requirements. (Medium Priority) ALL

6.6.2 Maintain communication between all dune heath landowners and the Sefton Coast Management Scheme. (Medium Priority) SCP/ Land owners

6.6.3 Ensure that land managers are aware of national policy guidance. (Low Priority) EN/ NT/ LA

## **7. Resource Implications**

### **7.1 UK BAP**

7.1.1 The total expenditure for the UK habitat action plan for lowland heath is approximately £47.4 million over fifteen years. Most of this expenditure is targeted at southern England. It

is likely that three-quarters of this expenditure will be found from the public sector.

### **7.2 North Merseyside BAP**

7.2.1 Estimated costs for management of existing sites are about £95 per hectare with re-establishment costs of about £300 per hectare. Detailed costings will be prepared when Action 6.5.1 is completed by end of 2001.

## **8. Links with other Action Plans**

### **8.1 UK BAP**

8.1.1 A UK HAP for lowland heath was published in 1995.

### **8.2 North Merseyside BAP**

8.2.1 Links with sand lizard SAP and sand dune HAP.

### **8.3 Conflicts**

8.3.1 Potential conflicts with Sand Lizard SAP.

## **9. Contacts**

Sally Edmondson, Liverpool Hope University College, Environmental and Biological Studies, Hope Park, Liverpool. L16 9JD

National Trust, Victoria Road, Freshfield, Formby, Merseyside. L37 1LJ

The Mersey Forest, Risley Moss, Ordnance Avenue, Birchwood, Warrington. WA3 6QX

English Nature, North West Team, Pier House, Wallgate, Wigan, Lancashire, WN3 4AL

Sefton Coast Partnership