

Conservation Grazing in Northern Ireland

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Farming is the cornerstone of Northern Ireland's rural economy, with vital roles in food production and the protection and enhancement of the countryside. Of the total land area of 1.4 million hectares within the province, approximately 80% is in agricultural use. Agriculture therefore has had a profound effect on the flora and fauna, both positively and negatively, with much of the rural landscape reflecting centuries of farming activity. In recent decades, a number of semi-natural habitats have suffered as a result of intensification.

In the past, overgrazing has been the prominent issue affecting conservation sites, especially in the uplands. To ensure that grassland biodiversity flourishes, it is vital to have a very sensitive and closely monitored grazing regime. Too much grazing can cause the ground to become bare and broken up (poaching), whereas too little grazing can cause scrub such as gorse to invade and threaten the existence of the grassland!

What the future may hold

The last few years have witnessed major changes in agriculture with the Common Agricultural Policy reform agreement, which changes the way farmers receive payments – indeed the new Single Farm Payment scheme which is aimed at creating sustainable land management, is predicted to lead to lower stock numbers, with the move away from payments per head of stock to area based ones. Undergrazing will therefore become a major problem facing many of our most important conservation sites due to insufficient stock numbers to graze marginal areas, allowing rank vegetation and scrub to invade.

One solution is agri-environment schemes, which have been developed by government to encourage farmers and landowners to adopt environmentally friendly management practices. Currently, 46% of NI farmland is covered by such schemes.

The Grazing Animals Project

Many sites are not covered by agri-environment schemes which is what led to the Grazing Animal Project (GAP) been formed in 1997 to aid the development of conservation grazing across the UK. It is a partnership project administered by the Wildlife Trusts, drawing representatives from both the nature conservation, agricultural and livestock sectors to further conservation grazing and sustainable land management systems. Ideally a grassland site will be covered in a patchwork of different vegetation heights in order to attract and support a wide range of insects, birds and mammals. Cattle in particular create this patchwork effect naturally as they graze, and are a more environmentally friendly way of achieving this than a mechanical alternative. At present, eight Ulster Wildlife Trust nature reserves are actively managed using grazing stock which has shown to be successful for grassland biodiversity; for example, the discovery of Irish Ladies Tresses orchid found at ECOS in 2006.

In Northern Ireland, the Grazing Animal Project (GAPNI) received a major boost at the start of 2006, with the formation of a GAPNI Steering Group, with representatives from conservation and agricultural organisations, together with conservation graziers. Then, in mid February 2006, two UWT staff, Rachel Bain - Conservation Manager and Andrew Upton - Reserves Manager, were employed by The Wildlife Trusts to produce a Development Plan for a Grazing Animal Project in NI.

GAPNI will assist with meeting NI targets for the Nitrates Directive, Water Framework Directive, Habitats Directive and UK Biodiversity Action Plan/ NI Biodiversity Strategy – clearly it will have a wide reaching impact on the health of our environment. However, for it to be successful, it is

imperative that it has the broad support of farmers through financial incentives and ensuring there is a market for the produce. The immense interest in GAPNI generated to date should ensure a long-term future for conservation grazing in the province. We hope to be able to employ a full-time GAPNI Co-ordinator to oversee the project in the long-term.

To find out more about the GAP project log on to www.grazinganimalsproject.org or phone Andrew or Rachel on 028 44830282.