

# MHC LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN

## PART 2: EVALUATION



### 2.1 Evaluation of Features and Qualities

Now that Part I has identified what is present on the MHC holding, this must be followed by an evaluation process in order to recognise the more important features and qualities that should be the focus of management effort. Importance in this context can be seen as having a legal duty attached or being rated by external authorities and the public as being of high priority for management effort.

This evaluation focuses on the individual features and qualities that have been recognised in Part I (An evaluation of the site as a whole using the Nature Conservation Review criteria (Ratcliffe, 1977) has been undertaken in a previous MHC management plan (Alma, 1999) and is not repeated here).

Many of the features present have been evaluated as part of nationwide or international exercises by external authorities. This has provided the grounds for certain statuses and designations being assigned such as 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' for landscape. Appendix I lists all features and identifies their recognised level of importance (internationally important, nationally important, locally important) and any relevant statuses or designations.

2.1.1 Evaluation of features table – see Appendix I

2.1.2 Evaluation of features - Summary

This section provides a short summary of the findings of the evaluation table.

Climate – this is not evaluated.

Landscape

The landscape and its composite landscape character types within the AONB boundary are legally protected and of international importance.

The landscape and its composite landscape character areas outside the AONB boundary are of local importance.

Geology and geomorphology

The geological exposures of the Hills are of national importance and legally protected as notified features of the Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Geological exposures off the Hills and many geomorphological features are all of local importance often designated as 'Local Geological Sites'.

Soils – these are not evaluated.

#### Hydrology

The aquifer and private water supplies of the Hills are designated a Groundwater Source Protection Zone and Drinking Water Protected Area under various legislation and directives. These highlight the hydrology of the Hills as particularly sensitive and that action to prevent pollution should be a high priority.

#### Flora - habitats

A huge range of flora is recorded on the MHC holding. However, Appendix I shows that certain vegetation communities are nationally important. The majority of these are notified by the SSSI legislation and there is, therefore, a legal duty to ensure their favourable status. They include; mire, broadleaved woodlands, alder woodlands and acid grassland communities with their elements of heath.

Other vegetation communities and habitats are highlighted as national priorities and include; calcareous grasslands, lowland neutral grasslands, bog, wet woodlands, ponds, hedgerows, swamps, wood pasture and traditional orchards.

#### Flora – species

Several plants are noted by the SSSI notification. This, together with other data sources, highlight the following species as priorities: Annual Knawel, Slender Hare's Ear, Wood Barley, Large-leaved Lime, Narrow-leaved Bittercress, White Horehound, Narrow-leaved Water Dropwort, Tubular Water Dropwort, Spreading Bellflower, Chamomile, Flat Sedge, Spring Cinquefoil and Small-leaved Sweet Briar.

#### Fungi

The waxcap assemblages are found to be of national importance although not covered by a legal duty. The status of certain species, such as Berkley's Earthstar (critically endangered), would be frontrunners for action delivering MHC's biodiversity duty.

Work needs to be done on evaluating the full range of fungi present.

#### Fauna

The fauna section highlights a large number of species of national note that should be prioritised. For full details see Appendix I, but these include: specialist woodland birds; birds of open ground; all bat species; all reptiles; specialist butterflies and moths associated with acid grasslands and ancient woodlands; white-clawed crayfish, dormice and polecat.

Work needs to be done on evaluating the full range of invertebrates present.

#### Cultural heritage

The MHC holding contains a significant number of recorded and unrecorded heritage assets. Three archaeological features were found to be of national importance and are designated as Scheduled Monuments, which conveys a legal duty to protect them. These heritage assets are Herefordshire Beacon Camp, the medieval Shire Ditch and the pair of barrows atop

Pinnacle Hill. All other archaeological features are of local importance and enrich our understanding of how the landscape has been managed in the past.

The majority of more recent built heritage is of local importance. This includes the springs/spouts, toposcope, paths, carriageways etc. However, the following features are Grade 2 listed and are therefore of national importance; the stocks, whipping post and animal pound at Link Top, a sewer gas vent at Westminster Bank and St Ann's Well building.

One of the key reasons for the Malvern Hills Acts was to help protect the rights of commoners. This, and their rights of common, should be bared in mind in our operations (however, it is clearly affected by factors outside of MHC's control).

### 2.1.3 Evaluation of Qualities

Much about the Hills and Commons that is valued is not a physical entity and cannot appear as a feature above. These are captured here as 'qualities'. This is informed by the 'Your Views' public consultation of spring 2014. The qualities are identified and evaluated here:

- Access – the right of the public to access all of MHC land is made clear in the Malvern Hills Acts along with MHC's statutory duty to ensure that the land is kept as open spaces for the recreation and enjoyment of the public. The right of access is therefore a legal demand and thus of high importance. Access also received the second highest number of votes in the public consultation. The work on infrastructure that facilitates access should also be valued in this way.
- Views – this quality of the Hills and other land came out as the most popular feature in the public consultation. The maintenance of open hilltops and hillsides that give panoramic views and strategic viewpoints is very important.
- Bucolic and tranquil surroundings that provide a sense of wildness, inspiration and invigoration. Night skies are dark and, cloud-permitting, star-filled.
- A uniquely distinctive profile of the Hills. The latter two qualities are key parts of the visitor experience. They have a large overlap with the landscape section.

## 2.2 Ideal Overall Management Objectives

In an ideal world what would MHC wish to achieve? This section lists a selection of ideal management objectives unfettered by finite resources and other limitations.

- To meet all legal obligations.
- To maintain or expand the existing holding.

- To provide suitable, safe access that enables people to use and enjoy the land in a way that does not negatively affect the features and qualities of the landscape.
- To meet the legal obligation to return the SSSI land back to the habitats as described/mapped in the SSSI notifications.
- To achieve favourable condition for all features and qualities by:
  - Undertaking or facilitating livestock grazing on all historically grazed land to match traditional grazing that maintains these grasslands and pastures.
  - Undertaking or facilitating sustainable orchard management and woodland management in all managed woods.
  - Undertaking or facilitating the sustainable cutting of bracken and scrub.
  - Eradicating all invasive, non-native species.
  - Maintaining or restoring suitable hydrological conditions.
  - Undertaking suitable specific management for important features.
- To offer education and interpretation that enlighten and enthuse a wide variety of stakeholders. This in turn will help protect the landscape.
- To encourage monitoring and research that informs management and enhances our understanding.
- To work with nearby landowners/managers to achieve a wider gain for the landscape and all in it.

These ideal objectives will be modified by all the factors (2.3) that will affect them. Realistic objectives are presented in Part 3.

## 2.3 Factors

The Hills, Commons and their features do not exist in isolation. They are affected by a wide range of local, regional and even global trends and influences from financial cuts to atmospheric pollution. It is vital to have an understanding of the main factors that influence our features and qualities and affect what MHC can realistically achieve in contrast to the ideal management objectives listed above.

### 2.3.1 Identification of Factors

Factors can be defined as ‘anything that has the potential to influence or change a feature, or to affect the way in which a feature is managed. These influences may exist, or have existed, at, any time. They can be positive, negative or both’ (Alexander, 2008). Constraints are included here as a form of factor. A list of relevant factors for the Hills and Commons have been identified here:

On-site human factors:	Livestock grazing
	Disturbance from recreation including dogs
	Erosion from recreation

	Other issues from recreation such as digging by metal detectorists
	Past land use
	Access
	Fire
	Highways and traffic
	Management – both inappropriate and appropriate
	Pollution
	Fly-tipping / litter / dumping of garden waste
	Encroachment
	Essential works – utility companies digging for pipes etc
	Culture / Archaeology
	Vandalism
	Vehicles – parking and driving on MHC land
	Species introductions
	Land ownership and tenure
	Other features (as recognised in Part I)
	Development
	Disease e.g. from livestock, pets
Off-site human factors:	MHC resources, knowledge/skills and finance
	Wider economy
	Laws – health & safety etc (see 1.2 Setting)
	Climate change
	Stakeholders
	Policies – of MHC and other relevant organisations
	Pollution, including atmospheric deposition
	Planning applications
	Tourism
	Designations – AONB, SSSI etc (see 1.2 Setting)
	Agricultural practices
	Forestry practices
	Minerals and Waste policy
	Species introductions
	Disease / health issues (e.g. tree diseases)
	Development
On-site natural factors:	Grazing – deer, rabbits etc
	Vegetation succession
	Geological processes
	Hydrology / fluvial processes – springs, flooding, waterlogging etc
	Fire
	Ecological processes – predation, decomposition etc
	Terrain

	Other features
Off-site natural factors:	Weather and climate
	Climate change
	Disease
	Colonisation
	Natural processes – geological, hydrological, ecological etc

A more detailed list of things that could damage certain SSSI features is available from Natural England, titled 'Operations Requiring Natural England's Consent'.

### 2.3.2 What are the main effects that these factors and constraints could have?

The list above highlights the main factors and constraints readily identified. It is not exhaustive. A variety of topics are covered and many of these are related to each other. It can be seen that some of the factors have major impacts upon our features and qualities and others have only minimal or localised effect. The major factors (in green) and their influence upon MHC land are discussed here:

- **Livestock grazing** – having animals eating vegetation will slow or arrest vegetation succession and maintain open habitats especially grasslands and wood pastures. Livestock grazing by commoners has happened on the Hills and Commons for hundreds of years. However, the amount of livestock grazing has varied through time but has decreased significantly since World War Two. An increase in **traffic** and an increase in **dogs** causing loss of animals, together with social changes and changes in **wider farm economics** are oft-quoted reasons for the declines. Old Hills for example was grazed heavily by local commoners with a variety of different animals until the unfenced B4211 became busy and the number of dog attacks on livestock rose. Hefted flocks once grazed hills such as Midsummer without the need for fencing. However, this cultural tradition of hefting has all but died out now.

Issues that can arise from grazing include localised enrichment through dunging, erosion, overgrazing, poor siting of fencing and water troughs and possible conflict with people and dogs. Livestock grazing provides an essential management tool delivering work year-round. Well-grazed swards are excellent for maintaining the condition and visibility of archaeological features. Livestock form a characteristic element of the area and many people enjoy seeing the animals. For certain sites, such as those with steep terrain, livestock are the only management option. **Grazing** also takes place by wild animals, this can be positive, such as the grazing of acid grasslands by rabbits, or negative such as the browsing of coppice stools by deer.

- The **access** arrangements mean that people can be anywhere at any time on MHC land. Large numbers of visitors can bring **erosion**, this is particularly noticeable on the ridge of the Hills and Herefordshire Beacon Camp. These worst affected areas are an eyesore, a safety hazard and are eroding away irreplaceable archaeology.

Mountain biking in the wrong place can cause intense damage especially to heritage assets such as the Shire Ditch.

Visitors and their dogs can also **disturb** wildlife especially ground-nesting birds that can, following repeated flushes from their nest, desert. Skylarks, lapwing, tree pipits and meadow pipits are most at risk.

A wide range of other effects come with visitors including **litter/flytipping, dog mess, vandalism, digging, parking and driving** on the commons – all of which have a negative effect. However, there are visitors who advocate sensible behaviour to others and volunteers who give their own time to improve our Hills and Commons.

- **Past land uses** have, coupled with natural processes, created the landscape and has an effect upon future management. The historic coppicing and mining of Park Wood for example created a light and species-rich wood – one worth preserving today.
- **Fire** has occurred as a management tool, through accident and from natural causes. The effect is the burning of vegetation, altering of soils and, in the case of uncontrolled fires, a danger to life (human, livestock and wildlife). The resultant bare ground is colonised by pioneer plants such as birch and foxglove – a radical change to flora can happen.
- **Practical management (both appropriate and inappropriate)** influences the features and qualities today and in the future. Management is largely beneficial (mowing paths, picking litter, rolling bracken, making dangerous trees safe) although there are conflicts. What is considered ‘appropriate’ may of course change through time, for example the planting of quarry exposures with non-native trees is now seen as inappropriate. The management delivered by MHC is partly determined by **terrain**, with the steeper and more uneven ground making the use of certain machinery impractical such as mowing with tractors. The steepness of much of the Hills makes traditional forms of woodland management tricky and uneconomical, made even harder by a lack of access for modern forestry machinery. Land management is carried out by other parties, utility companies for example undertake **essential works** without knowledge of the features.
- **Pollution** events, both on MHC land and nearby, can be a threat. Certain substances can poison or even kill life. Surface water and groundwater are particularly sensitive to these events. Aerial pollution is also a factor, specifically nitrogen deposition. This enriches the soil promoting vegetation succession.
- **Encroachment** - this is land theft and has been an issue for hundreds of years. Clearly management cannot be brought about if the ownership, and therefore the control of the land, is lost from MHC to another party.
- **Species introductions** – at best these are benign, but most have a negative impact such as bringing plant diseases, outcompeting native flora and fauna. Pheasants for example predate on native invertebrates and reptiles. Rhododendron alters the soils,

vegetation, landscape character and can carry *Phytophthora* disease which threatens other trees.

- The facts relating to **land ownership and tenure** could have a bearing on our features, see 1.1.3. Most notable are the legal rights of others to exercise forms of land management, such as grazing, independently of MHC.
- **MHC** as land owner and the principle land manager has a significant effect upon the land. The type and extent is shaped by **MHC's resources, skills, finance, laws and policies**. A large decrease in finance for example could mean rationalisation of effort towards certain features. **Laws and policy** too can bring change. But MHC are of course not the only body able to influence the site; **stakeholders** do too. Such a large, complex, popular and multi-designated land holding has a large range of stakeholders and their activities bring influence. External authorities have placed **designations** on much of the holding but especially on the Hills (as detailed in Part 1). Designations can mean the land has to be managed for certain outcomes and management is somewhat pre-determined meaning MHC may only have limited strategic control. Much of the land is also held in ten-year management agreements which to an extent dictate our land management for the agreement's duration.

Whilst this Management Plan has collated as much information as possible, it is important to acknowledge that as our knowledge and understanding of the land changes so may our management. With a limit to our knowledge, it is important to use the Precautionary Principle.

- The most important factor is **vegetation succession** – this is the natural development of the vegetation over time. Left alone a lawn will turn into tall herbs and grass, then bramble, with shrubs and tree saplings emerging and taking over eventually turning into woodland. As a cultural landscape the Hills and Commons have a long history with man arresting vegetation succession. Many of today's important features (e.g. acid grasslands) and special qualities (e.g. views) are maintained through halting succession often through mowing and grazing. Succession is the single biggest factor and much of the landscape has already been radically changed by it in recent times.
- **Geological processes**, such as soil creep, are effecting the land all the time. Typically they operate over a very long timescale. But the archaeological features and Hills themselves are slowly being worn down.
- **Features** that are listed here can themselves be a factor influencing other features. Management decisions need to be careful to find the right course of action where there is conflict between two or more features. Their relative importance (as identified in Appendix 1) will be taken into account. Much conservation work uses the **Sandford Principle**; this states that while public access and conservation can normally be balanced, there will be occasions where the two are irreconcilable and in these situations priority must be given to conservation features (National Parks UK, 2016)

Part 2 has evaluated the features and qualities, identified MHC's ideal land management objectives and discussed the factors that are relevant. This sets up Part 3 which moves away from theory and outlines our actual objectives and the work that we must do.

## References

Alexander, M. 2008. Management planning for nature conservation. Springer.

Alma, P.J. 1999. Management Plan for the land managed by MHC 2000 – 2005. MHC / University College Worcester.

National Parks UK, 2016. Website visited March 2016.

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Ratcliffe, D. 1977. A nature conservation review. Cambridge University Press.

**END OF PART 2**

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