

Dartmoor National Park Visit

(DNP) Devon, England, June 2015

Photos from the websites of DNP, Dartmoor Hill Pony, East Devon Pebblebed Heaths and dated photos which I took.

I spent two fascinating days with Charlotte Faulkner, President of the *Dartmoor Hill Pony Association* in June this year on Dartmoor where centuries of grazing by ponies, cattle and sheep habitats in DNP have shaped the landscape from earlier forest coverage into a unique community for rare wildlife communities. I was inspired by what I saw and learnt. [See link] <http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/laf-naturalenv/laf-ecologywildlife/laf-biodiversityprojects/conservation-grazing>



While the situation in DNP may vary from that faced in Australia where Brumby populations live, there may well be something to learn from overseas experiences to support the view that *when* Wild Horse populations are managed to sustainable levels, both healthy Wild Horses *and* Healthy Environments *can* result.

Can we draw anything from Dartmoor's example of managing introduced species?

We learn how changing one environmental factor causes a cascade effect which can increase or decrease that area's biodiversity. We hear it's vital to manage change in incremental stages with pre/mid/post reviews to ensure that the intended goal results. So let's look at Dartmoor:

The progression from forest to open grasslands in Dartmoor National Park is impressive and shows *how man's influence*, when carefully applied, can increase flora and fauna diversity. In particular, that managed grazing can be a key contributor to that area's increased biodiversity.

While not suggesting largescale grazing should be introduced, I do suggest that where a new species has *already been introduced*, it is important to identify which species have benefited from the introduction. If the benefits are seen as *positive*, then manage to sustain the increased bio-diversity, including the benefits from cropped grasses. An excess of any species, man-kind included, can be overwhelming. Read on to see how grazing now sustains Dartmoor.

Much of Dartmoor is 'Common Land' with farmers buying grazing rights, as used to occur in areas that are now called National Parks in Kosciuszko (NSW) and Barmah (Vic). At times, Dartmoor has carried up to 30,000 ponies. Around, 1,500 ponies are now grazing on 35,882 ha of Dartmoor, comprising 92 separately registered commons alongside cattle and sheep.

Ref-1: <http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/learningabout/lab-printableresources/lab-factsheetshome/lab-dartmoorponies>

The number of animals on DNP is determined by *grazing stock units*. Farmers apply each year for a number of units under Dartmoor’s lease arrangements. One unit equals one cow, or one pony, or four sheep. Farmers then decide which stock type/s to use on their allocated grazing units. The stock farmers chose is usually guided by profit margins, however recently farmers can access subsidies to graze ponies on DNP. The subsidies ensure sufficient gazing continues to occurs, even if it is not economical for farmers to sell ponies. [See previous link]

Animal herds and flocks do not roam far across the moor, but have become accustomed by social learning to keep to their ‘lear’ (territory area). Successful ‘learing’ is achieved when sufficient animals graze near each other, with sufficient food available to minimise the need for territory disputes or the need to move outside their home lear. [See DNP Vision link on page4]



The ponies are not tame, but are familiar with a human presence and being herded, with minimal handling, during annual ‘drifts’. Adult ponies pass to their prodigy their social knowledge of drift routines which enables a more streamlined removal program to operate. Older moor ponies lead the way down familiar paths to holding pens to be fed and health checked before farmers decide which to sell and which to return to the moor for breeding.

The pony market dropped 5-7 years ago when the global economy crashed. Of the ponies not sold, Charlotte Faulkner, Dartmoor Hill Pony Association and other pony ‘rehomers’ take around 50-70 to gentle and sell on. Those ponies remaining are slaughtered at a local abattoir, under a closely monitored system, for *Conservation Meat* and fed to zoo animals.



Ponies are sold as riding or carriage driving ponies and a growing number are now purchased for ‘*conservation grazing projects*’.



Where landowner grazing stock is not available and grazing is critical to maintain the interest of the habitat, the National Park Authority [DNPA] use a *mobile Dartmoor pony herd*. [See Link]

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/laf-naturalenv/laf-ecologywildlife/laf-biodiversityprojects/conservation-grazing>



We [DNPA] “*have had great success with this mobile herd, with botanical diversity increasing, and rare species such as marsh fritillary and bog hoverfly persisting, and even re-colonising areas of marginal agricultural land*”. [See link]



<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/laf-naturalenv/laf-ecologywildlife/laf-biodiversityprojects/conservation-grazing>

Dartmoor Fertility Control 3 year trial

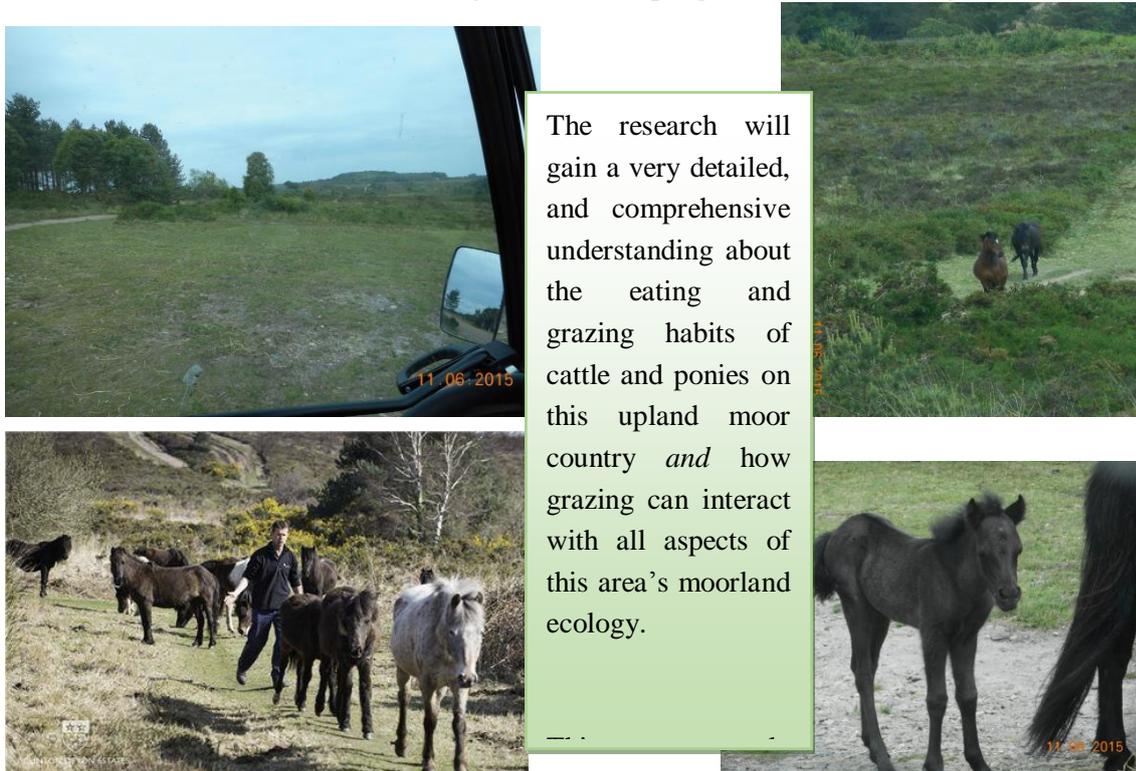
The next day I accompanied Charlotte across the moors to see her dart three mares from three separate mobs over about three hours. I was amazed how calm the process was, even though I had been told it should be. I even got to hold the dart gun....



To retain the centuries of *Pony Herd Social Learning* developed by living wild on the moor, until the pony market recovers, farmers organise for Charlotte to administer fertility control by dart gun to a proportion of their ponies. Charlotte is also now in the final of a three year fertility control trial - you may recall reading the article '*Dartmoor ponies go on the pill*'!

Bicton Common's 10 Year Grazing Research Program

Several English universities are researching the effects of 'conservation grazing' on several moors and other locations where ponies, cattle and/or sheep graze. My Dartmoor visit began by joining Charlotte Faulkner of the Dartmoor Hill Pony Association and a Dartmoor ranger, to visit Bicton Common where a 10 year research program, is in its third year.



The research will gain a very detailed, and comprehensive understanding about the eating and grazing habits of cattle and ponies on this upland moor country *and* how grazing can interact with all aspects of this area's moorland ecology.

- <http://www.pebblebedheaths.org.uk/content/news/dartmoor-ponies-released-onto-bicton-common.ashx>
- <http://www.clintondevon.com/content/press-releases/dartmoor-hill-ponies-with-gps-to-graze-east-devon-pebblebed-heaths.ashx>
- <https://www.facebook.com/events/611141142362133/>

Dartmoor National Park Authority Management Plan 2014 – 2019



The Dartmoor National Park Authority exists to secure for the public good: conservation, enhancement, enjoyment and understanding of Dartmoor National Park's special qualities such as its landscape, wildlife and cultural heritage. [See links below]

http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/541068/Man-plan-summary-2014.pdf and <http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/management-plan-review> and [summary of the plan \(PDF Help\)](#)

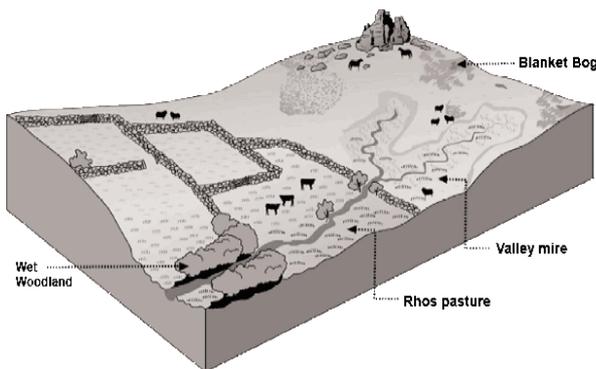
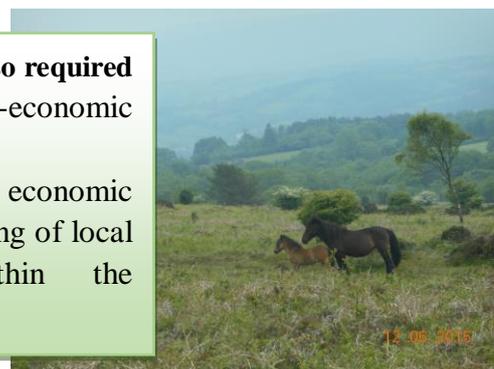


The [DNP] Authorities' role is defined by Parliament in 2 statutory purposes, to:

- Conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the national park; and
- Promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the National Park by the public.



The Authority is also required to meet a socio-economic duty, namely:
Seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the National Park



The Authorities' Objectives include:

- To maintain a viable farming community delivering a range of public benefits;
- To promote development that is good for Dartmoor;
- To maximize access and understanding for all;
- To deliver sustainability; and
- To maximize our use of human & financial resources; [See link]

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/aboutus/au-thea-uthority>

DNP Living Dartmoor- Strategy to deliver benefits for Dartmoor's Wildlife (2013)

This strategy ([link below](#)) co-ordinates work to enable a network of healthy, diverse habitats to benefit wild- life, landscapes, people & natural resources over the next ten years, including:

- Maintain a focus for coordinated biodiversity conservation on Dartmoor; and
- Lays out Plans for Key Wildlife Areas and Key Species for Conservation.

This ‘Living’ strategy also specifies that;

- Grazing and land holders are represented at project management levels, and
- Restoration proposals are developed with help from The Forest of Dartmoor Commoners, whose stock graze key sites, utilizing land owners’ knowledge and expertise to maximize Dartmoor National Park’s environmental needs. [See link]

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/laf-naturalenv/living-dartmoor>



12.06.2015

Partnership projects that support sustainable farming and forestry practices are an important way to ensure the survival of Dartmoor’s wildlife. Current examples of this work are the [Dartmoor Hill Farm Project](#), [Dartmoor Pony Conservation Grazing Scheme](#), and [Operation Wader](#).

Supporting the DNP ponies

“They are an integral part of the moorland landscape and are a part of the area’s cultural heritage. Ponies are also important for conservation grazing particularly on certain habitats such as wet permanent pasture”. [Ref: link below], and

“Ponies are less discerning eaters than both cattle and sheep. This is very important in areas such as Dartmoor where much of the semi-natural vegetation is rough, and of nutrient poor quality. Grazing of the semi-natural vegetation is important to the survival of many rare species. Although long vegetation is an essential part of many species habitats, so is the provision of short cropped areas.” [Link below]

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/learningabout/lab-printableresources/lab-factsheetshome/lab-dartmoorponies>



“The ponies are very hardy and actually thrive on Dartmoor despite the harsh weather and poor vegetation. In fact, by grazing the moorland they play a vital role in maintaining a variety of habitats and supporting wildlife.”

[Ref: link below]

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/laf-1andmanagement/laf-ponies>



Overview of Dartmoor's Vision April 2003



The four page pdf file *[link below]* states “*The Vision is predominantly one of a farmed (grazed) landscape relying essentially on the tradition of grazing the moorland with cattle, sheep and ponies.*” *[See link]*

http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/42010/dartmoor_vision_leaflet_april_2008.pdf

Habitat & Species Management

Extracts from the link below include:

- Maintaining the right conditions for wildlife to thrive can be a challenge!
- External factors such as climate change and changes in farming practices require a knowledgeable and flexible approach;
- Ecologists work with local land owners through liaison with partners such as Natural England to look after species and habitats to ensure habitats and species needs are known and acted upon. *[See link]*

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/laf-naturalenv/laf-ecologywildlife/laf-habitatspeciesmgmt>

Bogs and Wetlands Facts Sheet, *Factors affecting habitat* refers to:

- “*Under grazing and lack of scrub control is a threat to rhôs pastures*”, and

Bogs and Wetland facts Sheet, *A conservation success* refers to:

- However, the lack of proper grazing and the threat of ‘scrubbing up’ and developing into woodland remained, and also under *conservation success* is;
- (an) Exciting recent initiative has been to create a herd of true Dartmoor ponies that can be taken from pasture to pasture as a grazing and conservation tool.



In this way the Authority [DNP] can help conserve the Dartmoor pony, while managing the threatened rhôs pasture at the same time. *[See Bogs & Wetlands link]*

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/learningabout/lab-printablesources/lab-factsheets/home/lab>



Dartmoor Pony Conservation Grazing – as mentioned earlier, centuries of grazing by ponies, cattle and sheep habitats on Dartmoor National Park have shaped the landscape and created a unique community for rare wildlife communities:

- In recent years, changes in farming practices have resulted in a reduction in grazing pressure, in particular in the less productive areas of land – *which are precisely those that have the highest wildlife interest!* [see link under next dot point]
- In DNP's enclosed land, critical habitats occur in dry unimproved species-rich hay meadows and wet rush pastures, normally found in valley bottoms. [see link]

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/laf-naturalenv/laf-ecologywildlife/laf-biodiversityprojects/conservation-grazing>

Dartmoor Pony Conservation Grazing Project: Management of land for farming has had, and continues to have, a critical impact on Dartmoor's wildlife. [See link below]



For example, of the 17 species identified as priorities for Dartmoor conservation action in the Dartmoor [Biodiversity Action Plan](#), [BAP] *over three-quarters are dependent on grazing* by farm animals to maintain their habitat.



<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/laf-naturalenv/laf-ecologywildlife/laf-habitatspeciesmgmt>

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/laf-naturalenv/laf-ecologywildlife/laf-biodiversityprojects>

In Conclusion

It is my hope that the reader has gained further understanding of how:

- Species introduced long ago transformed Dartmoor into a World Heritage area;
- Grazing is essential on Dartmoor to retain its increased biodiversity;
- Australia has areas where species introduced centuries ago show increased diversity;
- Indiscriminate removal of species will compromise others who benefit from them, and
- Let's research all benefits to native species that result from Brumby grazing, and then, add this approach to Australian National Park initiatives and *manage grazing well*.

Jill Pickering, Australian Brumby Alliance Inc.

Written 14 September 2015

For more information on Dartmoor National Park check out the links below;

http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/42010/dartmoor_vision_leaflet_april_2008.pdf

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/laf-naturalenv/laf-ecologywildlife/laf-habitatspeciesmgmt>

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/lookingafter/laf-naturalenv/laf-ecologywildlife/laf-biodiversityprojects/conservation-grazing>

<http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/learningabout/lab-printableresources/lab-factsheetshome/lab-wildlifehabitatsfactsheet>, and

Factsheets/Leaflets <http://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/learningabout/lab-printableresources/lab-factsheetshome>