



FUTURE DANGER TO OPEN MOORLAND



In addition to sites considered under HEATH, almost the whole of the Land's End Peninsula, amounting to over 24,000 hectares, is being considered by Natural England as a target area for fencing and grazing under HLS.

A Heritage Lottery Report¹ compiled by Natural England raises some disturbing possible future developments.

Four sites totalling 322 hectares, including three commons, “were identified where grazing would be beneficial but where reintroduction of stock would be challenging. These sites are currently in the West Penwith ESA [Environmentally Sensitive Area] and the incentive to address these challenges is limited. Over the next 3 years the ESA agreements will end. We expect that the site managers will then want to come into the HLS [Higher Level Stewardship] scheme, and will be willing to address the issues.”

And again: “For 8 sites, 459 ha, we were able to carry out the baseline surveys but we were not able to engage the owner/occupiers in considering the project’s proposals. Again, these owners are in ESA or CSS [Countryside Stewardship Scheme] agreements that will end in the next few years, at which point the site managers will be looking to revise their management and will probably be looking to come into HLS.”

¹ Heritage Grants: Final Payment Request and Completion Report by Natural England (17/3/2009) ©Natural England

The 322 hectares refers to the West Penwith sites of Mulfra Downs, Chun Downs, Busvargus Common and Nine Maidens Common, while the 459 hectares refers mostly to the privately owned West Penwith sites of Zennor Hill, Tremedda Common, Boswens Common, Bartinney Downs, Tredinnick, Sancreed Beacon and Carnaquidden Downs.

But enclosure through the HEATH Project is not the only danger to the encircling of open access land with fencing and gates: Natural England has another equally pernicious scheme.

HIGHER LEVEL STEWARDSHIP

In addition to sites considered under HEATH, almost the whole of the Land's End Peninsula is considered by Natural England to be a target area for HLS amounting to over 24,000 hectares. A similar scheme is considered for The Lizard – a target area of over 16,000 hectares. For the full picture go to <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/images/hltargeting/Penwith.pdf>

Although it is highly unlikely that all the target areas will actually become part of HLS agreements, the fact that such a huge percentage of West Cornwall is even being considered is a disaster waiting to happen. If it all goes ahead then there will, literally, be no place free of cattle. And the cost would be enormous - £4,800,000 a year!

HLS agreements are for ten years and payments are sent out every six months relating to the options that have been chosen; payments also include capital items such as hedgerow restoration.

NE proclaim that our area is important “for its significant contribution to the following Higher Level Stewardship objectives: Biodiversity, Landscape, Historic Environment, Resource Protection and Access. Applicants have to perform one or more land management activities (for the full list go to the web site link above):

1. Maintain/Restore/Create important areas of the following habitats: coastal (particularly maritime cliff and slope) and lowland heathland, wetlands, species-rich grasslands and ancient semi-natural woodland.
2. Rare Birds: wherever priority sites for the chough occur.
3. Positive management of visible and below ground archaeological and historic features that are assessed as a priority in the region.

4. Protect, maintain and restore historic landscapes and their features such as parkland where they are assessed as a priority in the region.
5. Maintain/restore characteristic landscape features such as ancient field boundary patterns including Cornish hedges.
6. Create new permissive access where there is identified demand or need in order to link people with places, enhance existing networks and/or provide opportunity to improve people's understanding of the farmed environment through educational access particularly where there is potential for enhanced links to the South West Coast Path and settlements.

It is obvious that the wide range of these management activities place virtually anywhere in West Penwith in danger of being enclosed with new barbed wire fences and gates, and this despite some 20 years of Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) status in the approximate northern area from St Just to Newmill to St Ives which includes iconic moorland being – or intended to be – fenced and grazed under the HEATH/HLS.

To quote from a Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) leaflet dated 1988 on West Penwith Environmentally Sensitive Area: “The Ministry of Agriculture will offer farmers payments to adopt the methods which helped create the landscape and wildlife we value, and safeguard them for the future”; “The Ministry and local farmers are now co-operating to protect the area through agreements that will keep many of the Cornish hedges and moors as they are”. [Note: not as they may once have been as is the present intention of Natural England.]

And from a recent DEFRA web site on the ESA: “Agreement holders have to follow specific management practices designed to conserve and enhance the landscape, historic and wildlife value of the land under agreement.”

One of the serious failings of the ESA has been, and still is, the failure to monitor sites on a regular basis to ensure that all regulations are adhered to. I believe this resulted from a lack of funding for it to be done effectively and, consequently, much moorland is now again in need of ‘management’ through the HEATH/HLS schemes. ESA payments for farmers often meant that they received money for doing absolutely nothing, and this has resulted in the perceived

need by Natural England to introduce new management schemes that often overturn many ESA regulations.

Natural England has now, unwisely, ‘passed the buck’ to the various farmers/landowners to look after their own land under HLS agreements. We consider this to be both unsatisfactory and unfair: most farmers do not have the time or the specialist knowledge to monitor archaeological sites for damage nor determine effects on biodiversity, etc. Carnyorth Common near St Just has been under HLS agreement for over two years, yet, apart from the obvious fencing and gates and cattle, little appears to have changed. Is HLS going to be yet another failed government meddling in countryside ‘management’?

Our taxes are being used to restrict our freedom of movement on open access land, not to improve it as declared by Natural England – grant money for this iniquitous scheme should be withheld. This is particularly important now that we are in the middle of a very serious recession when many budget cuts will affect vital public services.

The dangers to our open moors as outlined above make it all the more essential that our campaign to achieve a grazing exemption is successful. All that Save Penwith Moors are asking for is that a few relatively small areas of open access moorland are basically left alone for the public to enjoy in peace and safety – is this really too much to ask for when there are so few cattle-free places remaining in West Penwith?

6th March 2010