

Conservation in the Peak District National Park

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Conservation in the Peak District National Park

Conservation of natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage is one of the main purposes of National Parks in Britain. For the Peak District National Park [PDNP Fact Sheet] this means protecting and enhancing a living and changing landscape which has been forged by natural forces over millions of years and shaped by human activities over thousands of years.

Under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, the Peak District became Britain's first National Park in 1951. **National Parks** are beautiful and spectacular places which are specially protected by law. There are nine National Parks in England, two in Scotland and three in Wales. In addition, the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads is included in the National Parks family although it is not designated as a National Park. Each National Park is managed by a National Park Authority, an independent public body funded by the Government.

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act set out the purposes of National Park

Authorities as:

- conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of National Parks; and
- promoting opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of National Parks by the public.

The Environment Act 1995 updated this so that National Park Authorities must also consider the economic and social well-being of local communities. Where the purposes conflict, conservation takes priority: this is known as the Sandford Principle.

Conservation in the Peak District National Park involves more than preventing damage and leaving the countryside alone. Management is needed to maintain the variety and interest of the landscape. This means:

- looking after the best features of the landscape;
- improving neglected features;
- managing developments to enhance the environment and minimise any potential damage.

More than 90% of the Peak District National Park is privately owned, which means that many different organisations and people are involved

in conservation. The main organisations are:

- The Peak District National Park Authority is the planning authority for the National Park. It decides conservation policy.
- Natural England is the government's statutory adviser on the natural environment in England. Its work includes the designation and management of National Nature Reserves, notification of some Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and advice about nature conservation.
- **English Heritage** is the government's statutory adviser on the historic environment in England. It provides advice and grants for conservation projects, keeps records and manages over 400 historic properties.

Others include the **National Trust**, the **Forestry Commission**, utilities companies, the **Wildlife Trusts**, the **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds**, the Chatsworth Estate, Sheffield City Council, individual farmers and other landowners.

Conservation in the Peak District National Park involves partnerships.

A not so natural landscape

There are very few areas of the Peak District that are completely natural. Thousands of years of farming [Farming Fact Sheet], lead mining [Lead Legacy report], quarrying [Quarrying and Mineral Extraction Fact Sheet] and other human activities have shaped the landscape we see today.

The rocks [Rocks and Minerals Fact Sheet] of the Peak District National Park have helped create the landscape and influence the plants and animals [Wildlife Fact Sheet] that live there. Gritstone lies under the bleak exposed moorlands of the South West Peak and Dark Peak. Softer shale rock lies under the more fertile valleys. Limestone is the bedrock of the White Peak, a grassy plateau criss-crossed by drystone walls giving way to steep-sided dales.

MOORLAND

Three-quarters of the world's heather moorland is in the UK, with around 19,000 hectares in the Peak District National Park. It is of global ecological importance, with many rare and endangered plant and animal species.

The moors are dominated by cottongrass on the wet peat bogs, with heather, bilberry and crowberry on drier soils. Sphagnum moss was once dominant in the peat bogs. When the moss died its remains turned into more peat.

The heather moorlands provide food and shelter to large populations of red grouse. The commonest bird is the meadow pipit. The most south-easterly breeding ground for the golden plover, a protected bird species, is in the Dark Peak.

The Peak District is home to a number of rare fauna and flora. It is the only place in the world where the Derbyshire feather-moss grows. Just one square metre of this incredibly rare plant exists, in a secret location.

The main threats to the moorland are:

- Summer fires: These kill the plants and destroy the

top layers of peat soil.

It can take many years for the vegetation to regrow.

- Climate: Much of the moorland is 500-600 metres above sea level and average temperatures are low (11-12°C in summer). This causes very slow plant growth.
- Pollution: Since the Industrial Revolution acid rain has been damaging the moorland plants, in particular mosses and lichens. Oxides of sulphur and nitrogen are emitted from factories and power stations, and also from cars. These dissolve in rainwater and make it more acidic.
- Grazing pressure: Over-grazing by sheep can reduce heather cover and prevent vegetation getting re-established on bare ground, leading to species such as bracken taking over.
- Trampling: Every year, hundreds of thousands of visitors' feet wear away the vegetation and expose the peat which then erodes.

Peatlands are the single largest **carbon store** in the UK.

The Peak District moorlands store between 16 and 20 million tonnes of carbon. When damaged, by erosion, fire or pollution, peat bogs release their stored carbon.

Protecting remaining peatlands and restoring damaged areas is therefore crucial not just for nature conservation but also to reduce the impacts of climate change.

WOODLAND

Wooded valleys on shale and gritstone are important features of the Dark Peak and South West Peak.

Peak District woodlands typically consist of sessile oak and birch, often with some mountain ash. These ancient woodlands are examples of the type of vegetation that would have covered the gritstone areas in the past, before the woodlands were cleared for farming and a wetter climate encouraged

peat to develop. Birds found here include the redstart, pied flycatcher and wood warbler.

Grazing by sheep stops seedling trees growing and action for conservation usually involves fencing areas of woodland to keep sheep out.

Limestone Heaths and Dales
In the White Peak, limestone heaths display the mixture of acidic and lime-loving vegetation characteristic of the limestone plateau before the land was enclosed for more intensive farming.

The grasslands and ancient woodlands found in the dales are of outstanding ecological value. These woodlands are of ash and wych elm with a shrub layer of hazel, dogwood and

bird cherry. The grasslands have a wide variety of plant species including scabious, harebell, milkwort and several species of orchids. Many insects and other small creatures make their homes in these dales while several species of bat live in the caves formed in the limestone.

This type of grassland has been created by centuries of sheep grazing. More recently, however, a reduction in grazing has allowed hazel and hawthorn scrub and coarse grasses to flourish, shading out small flowering plant and grass species. Conservation of these dales requires the grazing of sheep to be maintained and encouraged at appropriate levels to restore the rich grassland habitat.

The impact of humans

The landscape most strongly influenced by human activity is the enclosed farmland [Farming Fact Sheet] of the White Peak. On some farms there are a few remaining unimproved grasslands (no fertiliser added) supporting a wide range of wild flowers such as meadow saxifrage and cowslip. The drystone walls are a striking feature of the White Peak, and the small fields and traditional

stone buildings add much to the characteristic landscape of the area.

Although it looks like a wilderness, the high moorlands of the Dark Peak and South West Peak have been created by human activity. Once covered in woodland, the uplands of the Peak District were cleared by Bronze Age farmers and have been maintained over the centuries for sheep grazing and grouse shooting. Without active

management, such as heather burning, the moorlands would revert to scrub and forest.

Mineral extraction [Quarrying and Mineral Extraction Fact Sheet] has also had a profound influence on the Peak District landscape. Remains of **former leadworkings** can still be seen today and are often colonised by rare lead-tolerant plants such as leadwort and yellow mountain pansy. By far the most dramatic landscape impact today is made by large-scale quarrying.

Conserving the natural landscape

The Peak District National Park is a protected landscape. It contains nationally and internationally important habitats, species and sites. The International Union for Conservation of Nature designates the Peak District as a Category V protected landscape. This means that the cultural and natural aspects of the landscape are inextricably linked, and that the human communities living in these landscapes are central to sustaining them.

The key pieces of legislation for conservation of the natural environment in the Peak District are the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (as amended), the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), the Environment Act 1995 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

There are 54 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) designated by **Natural England** for their national importance for ecology [Ecology fact Sheet] or geology [Geology

Fact Sheet] and covering just over 50,000 hectares (35%) of the National Park. Natural England seeks agreements with land owners for SSSIs to be managed in such a way as to conserve their special qualities. The Peak District National Park also has three National Nature Reserves, Dovedale [Dovedale Fact Sheet], which includes Biggin Dale, Derbyshire Dales which consists of five limestone dales (Cressbrook, Lathkill, Hay, Long and Monk's) and the plateau of Kinder Scout.

Most of the SSSIs have added protection as Natura 2000 sites. The Natura 2000 network applies to Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), established under the EU Birds Directive and Habitats Directive respectively. The Peak District has one SPA, the Peak District Moors (44,842 hectares), and two SACs, the South Pennine Moors (43,642 hectares) and the Peak District Dales (2,160 hectares).

The Peak District National Park Authority works with other organisations to achieve its aims. For example, in 2001 the Authority set up the **Peak Birds Project** in collaboration with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The

project aims to halt the decline of three species of endangered Peak District birds, the curlew, lapwing and twite, by helping farmers apply for grants to create favourable habitats on their land. By 2007, some 145 farmers were implementing bird-friendly management on their farms as a result of advice from the project. The success of the project is largely down to the enthusiasm of Peak District farmers. Along with other projects and initiatives, the Peak Birds Project is helping to deliver the **Peak District Biodiversity Action Plan**.

Under the **Peak District Local Biodiversity Action Plan** 15 habitat and seven species action plans have been prepared for those habitats and species at greatest risk. At-risk species include curlew, white-clawed crayfish, lapwing, water vole and Derbyshire feather moss. Habitats at risk include limestone dales, lead rakes, hay meadows and blanket bog.

There are a number of agri-environment schemes to support the nature conservation efforts of farmers and other land owners.

The **Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS)**, which encourages farmers

and land owners to conserve ecologically important land, covers 69% of the Peak District National Park. It offers two tiers of support, entry level and higher level. An upland level is being introduced in July 2010, replacing the Hill Farm Allowance Scheme. The ESS replaces the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme and the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

The Environmental Enhancement Scheme is a grant scheme run by the Peak District National Park Authority to encourage farmers to retain unimproved fields,

restore ponds and maintain drystone walls and hedges.

English Woodland Grant Scheme run by the Forestry Commission aims to encourage the creation and management of woodland by providing money to help towards the cost of work.

Environmental education, interpretation and information are important tools for conservation. **Losehill Hall**, the Peak District National Park Learning and Environmental Conference Centre based at Castleton, offers a wide range of environmental learning

opportunities for people of all ages, including school visits, teacher training, and training and development for environmental professionals. It also offers conference, training and seminar facilities.

The **National Park Ranger Service** provides help and information for visitors, and maintains good relations with farmers and local residents. Assisted by **conservation volunteers**, rangers are involved in many conservation projects such as path restoration and fencing.

Conserving the built landscape

Most Peak District buildings are made of local stone and reflect local building traditions.

The National Park Authority is the planning authority for the Peak District National Park. It controls development to maintain the area's special character. It also issues guidelines on the design and materials of any new building or extension.

There are several ways that the built environment can be protected and conserved:

- **Conservation Areas.** These are places with 'special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance'. There are 109 **Conservation Areas** in the Peak District National Park. Enhancement projects in a Conservation Area might include paving, burying overhead telephone and electric wires, tree planting and restoring traditional

features such as wells, pinfolds or lamp-posts, as well as providing grants for the repair and renovation of non-listed buildings.

- **Listed Buildings.** There are nearly 2,900 buildings in the Peak District National Park that are of special architectural or historic interest. Special care is given to their conservation and grants are available from the National Park Authority or English Heritage for their repair or restoration.

Archaeological conservation

Important areas of historic landscape can be found throughout the Peak District National Park. There are remains from the Neolithic age (e.g. Arbor Low and the chambered tomb at Five Wells), Bronze Age (e.g. stone circle and tomb on Stanton Moor), early Iron Age (e.g. hill fort on Mam Tor), Roman period (e.g. Navio fort at Brough), and many developments from medieval times onwards.

Lead mining has had the most significant effect on the landscape with mines along rakes (veins of lead ore), soughs (drainage channels) and smelting sites.

For many years the National Park Authority has been conserving archaeological sites which illustrate the history of the landscape particularly well, including:

- an extensive upland Bronze Age landscape at Big Moors;
- a Romano-British settlement and field system at Chee Tor;
- a medieval strip field system at Chelmorton;
- a valley at Roystone Grange where human activity can be traced back 10,000 years. Roman farm and field walls and a medieval monastic farm (grange) are of particular interest.

The National Park Authority works with English Heritage to help identify and designate Scheduled Ancient Monuments, and to raise awareness about the importance of historic landscapes. There are 457 Scheduled Ancient Monuments in the Peak District National Park. Thousands of other historic sites and monuments are listed in the **Historic Environment Record**, which is constantly added to as new discoveries are made.

Further information

- **Moors for the Future**
- **Peak District Mines Historical Society**
- **Derbyshire Historic Buildings Trust**
- **Landscape Character Assessment**
- The Peak District: Landscapes Through Time, John Barnatt and Ken Smith, published by Windgather Press, June 2004, £17
- **Friends of the Peak District**