

CUILCAGH MOUNTAIN

Views About Management The Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 Article 28(2)

A statement of Environment and Heritage Service's views about the management of Cuilcagh Mountain Area of Special Scientific Interest ("the ASSI")

This statement represents the views of Environment and Heritage Service about the management of the ASSI for nature conservation. This statement sets out, in principle, our views on how the area's special conservation interest can be conserved and enhanced. Environment and Heritage Service has a duty to notify the owners and occupiers of the ASSI of its views about the management of the land.

Not all of the management principles will be equally appropriate to all parts of the ASSI and there may be other management activities, additional to our current views, which can be beneficial to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest. It is also very important to recognise that management may need to change with time.

The management views set out below do not constitute consent for any operation or activity. The written consent of Environment and Heritage Service is still required before carrying out any operation or activity likely to damage the features of special interest (see the Schedule on pages 2 and 3 of the attached Document B for a list of these operations and activities). Environment and Heritage Service welcomes consultation with owners, occupiers and users of the ASSI to ensure that the management of this area maintains and enhances the features of interest, and to ensure that all necessary prior consents are obtained.

MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Blanket Bog

Blanket bog is a unique habitat for wildlife. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the bog through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals. The latter includes important invertebrate communities.

Bogs depend on rainwater and maintaining a high water table is vital to the "health" of the bog. In addition, the peat soils and many of the species that grow there are very sensitive to physical disturbance.



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Specific objectives include:

Ensure that the blanket bog is not burnt in order to prevent the loss of more specialised plants and animals and to avoid damage to peat soils which could lead to erosion.

Where appropriate, encourage the blocking of drains to prevent the bog from drying out.

Where appropriate, prevent the loss of light-demanding peatland species through the control of scrub and trees.

Where the surface is not too wet, blanket bogs can sustain very light levels of grazing by sheep. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage a regime that avoids overgrazing or poaching.

Where the habitat has been subjected to heavy grazing, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage a reduction in stocking density to allow the bog to recover.

Wet and Dry Heath

Wet and dry heaths are also important habitats for wildlife. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the heath through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals.

Most heathland communities need some management to retain their interest. Small patches of scrub within heathland are valuable in providing additional habitat niches, but in the absence of management, woody species can quickly take over. On the other hand, too much grazing, especially through the winter, can cause heathers to be replaced by coarse grasses. Shepherding can help to spread grazing pressure over a wider area while fencing may also be useful in some cases to control stock numbers and movement.

Specific objectives include:

Low intensity grazing has contributed to the conservation and enhancement of the heathland. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the continuation and extension of this practice.

Where the habitat has been subjected to heavy grazing, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage a reduction in stocking density to allow the heath to recover. Shepherding and fencing to control the movement of stock may also be beneficial in some situations.

Where burning is considered appropriate, it should only be undertaken after close consultation with, and the agreement of, Environment and Heritage Service. Burning can cause the loss of more specialised plants and animals and may damage the peat soils, leading to erosion.

Where appropriate, encourage the blocking of drains to prevent wet heath from drying out.

Prevent the loss of light-demanding heathland species through the control of scrub and bracken. In general, this can be achieved through the appropriate grazing regime. In some cases other methods of control, such as cutting, may be required.

Montane Heath

Montane heath is an important habitat for wildlife. In Northern Ireland it is only found in a few of the highest, most exposed upland areas. The vegetation usually consists of low-growing, wind-clipped dwarf-shrubs, such as Heather, growing with mosses, lichens and sedges. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the montane heath through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals. These include important invertebrate communities, in addition to a number of rare plants.

Due to the effects of high altitude and harsh climate, montane heath is very slow growing and requires little active management. However, it is also slow to recover from disturbance and is therefore highly susceptible to damage through grazing and trampling.

Montane heath can generally sustain light summer grazing by sheep with stock being removed during the winter. Shepherding can help to spread grazing pressure over a wider area, avoiding localised trampling, erosion and nutrient enrichment through dunging. Fencing may also be useful in some cases to control stock numbers and movement. Where montane heath has been damaged by heavy grazing, it may be necessary to consider temporarily removing grazing stock to allow the vegetation to recover.

Montane heath is vulnerable to trampling through recreational use. The effects are usually localised but visitor pressure may require careful management through, for example, the appropriate placement and maintenance of footpaths.

Specific objectives include:

Montane heath can sustain light summer grazing by sheep. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the continuation of this practice.

Where the habitat has been subjected to heavy grazing, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage a reduction in stocking density to allow the montane heath to recover. Shepherding and fencing to control the movement of stock may also be beneficial in some situations.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage sensitive recreational management, for example, through careful routing of footpaths and siting of information panels.

The use of burning to manage montane heath is damaging and should be avoided.

Inland rock

Inland cliffs and screes often support specialised communities of plants and animals that are not found elsewhere. Many species use the scree, crevices and cliff ledges as a shelter from extremes of climate and from competition with more dominant plants, or as a refuge from grazing. A number of birds of conservation importance, such as peregrine falcon, also use rock ledges as safe nesting sites.

Cliffs and screes often need little or no management. Low levels of grazing can be beneficial in some circumstances, by preventing more vigorous species from shading out the less vigorous plants. Where heavy grazing has restricted particular species and communities to cliffs and scree slopes, controlling stock levels on the surrounding land could allow some of these species to spread more widely.

Screes are often unstable and their fragile plant communities are vulnerable to physical disturbance such as trampling. As a result some screes and cliffs may require protection from damage caused by heavy grazing and recreation such as walking and rock climbing.

Specific objectives include:

Light grazing can prevent less vigorous plants from being shaded out. Where appropriate, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the continuation of this practice.

Where the habitat is subject to heavy grazing or where grazing on surrounding land has isolated the vegetation communities of cliffs and screes, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage a reduction in stocking density to allow grazing-sensitive species to disperse more widely.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage sensitive recreational management. For example, where possible new footpaths should generally be routed around scree rather than through it. Where rare plants or cliff-nesting birds are known to be present careful management of climbing routes and the timing of the activity may be required.

Lakes and Pools

Upland, nutrient-poor (Dystrophic) lakes and pools are also important habitats for wildlife. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the lakes and pools through the conservation of their associated native plants and animals. The latter include important invertebrate communities.

Dystrophic lakes and pools depend on water quantity and quality to maintain their conservation value. They are generally sensitive to disturbance and nutrient enrichment. Sympathetic management practices and recreation have contributed to maintaining this feature of interest.

Specific objectives include:

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance of water quality through the control of pollution and artificial enrichment.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance of natural water levels.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance of sympathetic management practices to ensure that disturbance to the waters, bed and shore of the lakes and pools and their wildlife is minimised.

Environment and Heritage Service recognises the important economic and social roles of fishing and welcomes sustainable fishery management that is sensitive to the special interests of the lakes and pools.

Management principles applicable to all habitats throughout the site

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage all activities associated with site maintenance, management, access and recreation to be undertaken in a sensitive manner that ensures disturbance to the site and its wildlife is minimised.

Maintain the diversity and quality of the habitats by ensuring there is no application of fertiliser, slurry, herbicide or fungicide to the site.

Discourage non-native species, especially those that tend to spread at the expense of native wildlife.

Maintain the diversity and quality of habitats associated with the main habitats, such as grassland and scrub through sensitive management. These adjoining habitats are often very important for wildlife, especially invertebrates.

Golden Plover

Cuilcagh Mountain ASSI supports numbers of Golden Plover that are important in an all-Ireland context. The Golden Plover is a wading bird of the uplands that nests on relatively flat or gently sloping areas. Vegetation structure is important to Golden Plover. The species prefers shorter swards that are typically found on ridges, areas of old cut-over bog and recovering burnt areas. Low vegetation allows ease of movement for foraging and lets nesting birds detect approaching

predators easily. Flushes and other wet areas are important to Golden Plover as feeding areas for chicks because these hold large numbers of invertebrates.

Specific objectives include:

Environment and Heritage Service would wish to see diversity in the vegetation structure of the bog and heath across the site as a whole. This should include small areas of short vegetation suitable for nesting activities. Where this structure cannot be achieved naturally or by light grazing, Environment and Heritage Service may consider alternative management treatments for specific, localised areas. These treatments could include activities such as heavier grazing or Heather flailing when undertaken in a highly controlled way. Such actions should only be considered after close consultation with, and the agreement of, Environment and Heritage Service.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage actions which maintain or enhance soil wetness and wetland features, such as pools and flushes, as feeding areas for Golden Plovers - this can be achieved by blocking drains across peatland habitat.

The geological series

Earth science features provide information about a region's geological history and can also aid interpretation of geological processes in the past and present.

The earth science interest at Cuilcagh Mountain comprises important exposures of Carboniferous strata together with a range of weathered limestone (karst) features. The solid geology of interest occurs throughout the ASSI and includes minor exposures within sinks and dolines through to major outcrops along the stream valleys, ridges and the summit series. Karst features are related to the occurrences of limestone and are generally found along the southern and eastern areas of the ASSI.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance of the ASSI and its earth science interest.

Provided no damaging activities, as set out in the Schedule (pages 2 and 3), are undertaken without consent, the needs of owners, occupiers and the Department can be met. Earth science features such as those at Cuilcagh Mountain may require occasional management intervention to maintain access to, and exposure of, the geology. This could include selectively removing vegetation or any major build up of loose rock.

Specific objectives include:

Maintain the geological series in an undamaged state.

Maintain access to the geological series.

Surface karst features and caves

Areas of limestone within the Cuilcagh ASSI typically exhibit surface features collectively known as karst. Such features include limestone pavement, sinking streams, springs, depressions known as dolines and dry valleys. These landforms are important in helping us to understand historical and present processes affecting and shaping these areas. Landforms can be damaged by stone removal, infilling or slope regrading. These features are also commonly related to important underground cave systems and associated groundwaters which can be affected through changes in land management, especially drainage activities, the use of fertiliser or pesticides and applications of slurry.

These features owe their form to a range of processes which have operated over tens of thousands of years. These include deep weathering, the effect of past ice action and the slow dissolving of the limestone itself by water. These processes have given rise to a landscape that is extremely vulnerable. Once they have been damaged, these features cannot be recreated.

Minor cave systems are present under parts of the Cuilcagh ASSI. In addition, the main streams flowing off Cuilcagh are all directed towards the major cave systems to the north and east of the ASSI. Although underground, these are linked to the surface by a variety of features including cave entrances, shafts, sinking streams and by water movement through the ground which ultimately flows into the caves.

Surface features can be damaged by stone removal, infilling or regrading, while caves are susceptible to damage through decline in general water quality. Caves and surface depressions can be damaged through inappropriate disposal of rubbish or waste of any type. Recreational activities such as caving may be detrimental if undertaken in an insensitive way.

Specific objectives include:

Environment and Heritage Service would wish to see all karst surface features retained through sympathetic land management practices.

Environment and Heritage Service would discourage the inappropriate disposal of waste of any type within the site.

Caving should be undertaken in a responsible manner through adherence to best practice as advocated by national caving bodies.


E Diane Stevenson
Authorised Officer

Dated the *1st* of *FEBRUARY* 2008

