Nature Recovery Plan Annex 1: the current situation

This document sets out context behind the North York Moors National Park Nature Recovery Plan, including a description of existing habitats, the interplay with access for nature, and an assessment of current threats and pressures affecting nature recovery in the National Park.

Habitats within the National Park

Moorland

Approximately one third of the National Park is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Area of Conservation (SAC) or a Special Protection Area (SPA). The largest designation is the North York Moors SSSI, SPA and SAC, which covers 90% of the moorland within the National Park. This area is designated for its Blanket Bog, Dry Heath and Wet Heath habitats, as well as around 3% of the breeding populations of Merlin and Golden Plover in Great Britain (at the time of designation). The majority of the moorland designated sites in the North York Moors are currently not in favourable condition, being categorised as “unfavourable recovering” and several declining in condition due to the diversity of species or structures within habitats nor meeting the favourable criteria.

The western and southern extent of moorland is dominated by dry dwarf shrub heath, with a central band of dry modified bog, and moorlands to the east and north consisting of a mosaic of wet and dry dwarf shrub heath. Land adjacent to the moorland boundary is a mixture of productive arable and grazing land- where it is accessible- and dense bracken on steeper banks, with very little marginal, wet habitat compared to other areas of uplands within the North of England. The moorlands, and adjacent in-bye land and pastures in the valleys, support nationally important numbers of Curlew, as well as other rare wading birds including Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Snipe and Redshank.

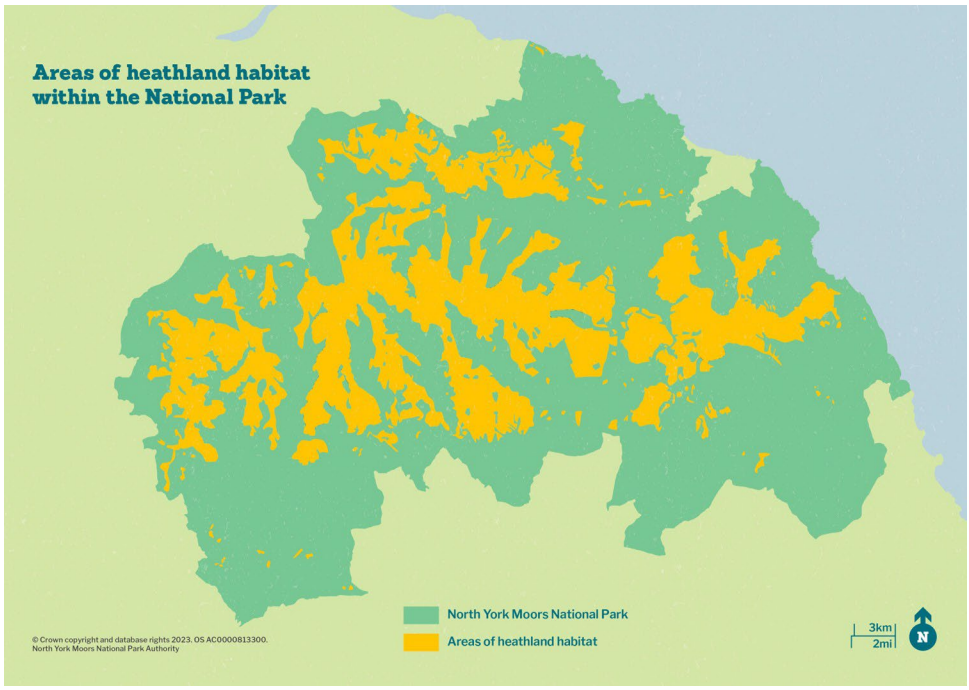

Figure 1 Areas of heathland habitat within the National Park

Woodland

The National Park is 22% woodland. Ancient semi-natural and other broadleaved woodland across the National Park supports a vast array of rare plants, fungi, birds and mammals. However, over half of the total area of all ancient woodland sites have been converted to productive plantation woodland, mostly through planting conifers[1]. Approximately two thirds of the woodland cover within the National Park is plantation woodland, and broadly coniferous. The forestry is largely in the south of the National Park, with the highest concentration in the southeast.

Although plantation woodlands typically support overall lower levels of biodiversity compared to broadleaf woodlands of a similar age and size, the larger well managed forest areas, such as Langdale Forest, support a host of wildlife including some nationally rare species[2]. Approximately 80% of the National Park's woodlands are in active management[3].

[1] As shown in the Ancient Woodland Inventory produced by Natural England
[2] Walker, B. (2014) Langdale Forest, A Case of Mistaken Identity. PLACE.
[3] As reported by Forestry Commission

Figure 2 Areas of woodland within the National Park

Marine and Coastal

The National Park encompasses 26 miles of dramatic coastline, from towering cliffs and secluded villages to sweeping shores and traditional fishing harbours. This spectacular coastline makes up the eastern edge of the National Park and consists of a great diversity of habitats and species. The number of habitats – grasslands, woodlands, coastal slopes, rocky shores, coastal streams, and the marine environment – means the biodiversity interest on the coast is particularly abundant. The coastline is a mix of hard cliffs that support breeding seabirds and soft coastal slopes made of calcareous clays. This variety of exposures and slip features enables a complex mosaic of habitat types to develop with a strong maritime influence.

The clifftop plateau is predominately farmed and supports species such as Yellowhammer and Linnet. Intersecting the plateau are steep wooded gills, which contain many ancient woodland indicator species. The coastal cliffs and crags are home to a number of sea birds such as Kittiwake, Fulmar and Sand Martin. Peregrine Falcon have also been observed in the craggy outcrops searching for prey. Multiple streams, alongside the larger Esk Estuary, transport freshwater from high on the moors into the coastal zone. This mixing of waters creates a nutrient-rich environment which is important for migratory fish movements.

Large areas of the coastline are protected via national and international designations. The vegetated sea cliffs of the Beast Cliff (Robin Hood's Bay) Special Area of Conservation are internationally recognised as one of the best examples of this habitat on the northeast coast. The dynamic nature of the cliffs and the underlying geology means that the vegetation is continually changing, which attracts a wide range of wildlife.

The coastal slope grasslands below the soft cliffs offer some of the most unimproved habitats in the whole of the National Park. These habitats have not been ploughed or

fertilised and have therefore retained an abundance of plant life, including rare orchid species. Management of these areas is needed to stop them becoming overgrown with ranker vegetation such as bracken and bramble.

The intertidal zone and marine area are equally diverse, with large swathes of kelp forest providing habitat and food for a huge variety of wildlife including shellfish, seals, and seabirds. The complex rocky shore habitats within the Runswick Bay Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) are nationally recognised and provide specific protection to the ocean quahog – a long-lived species of bivalve mollusc. Out to sea, marine mammals including Bottlenose Dolphins, Harbour Porpoise, and five different whale species have been recorded.

Grassland

The southern section of the National Park is located on limestone and the resultant calcareous grasslands contain some of our rarest species. Butterfly species such as Duke of Burgundy and Dingy Skipper and plant species such as Fly Orchid and Dropwort, can be found in these areas, and are of national importance. Other important grasslands within the National Park include our coastal grasslands which can be acidic or calcareous and this mosaic supports a diverse range of species. Pockets of species rich neutral, marshy, and acid grassland can also be found scattered throughout the National Park, particularly on steep slopes or hard to access locations, where improvement for agricultural purposes would not be viable.

Species-rich grasslands are one of our rarest and most vulnerable habitats, following a century of loss and fragmentation. They are also one of the harder habitats to recreate, as their condition is strongly linked to the condition of the soil, which in many places has too many nutrients to support a diversity of wildflowers, and grasslands require regular and careful management.

Wetland and rivers

The National Park encompasses two main river catchments: the Rye/Derwent catchment and the Esk and Coastal Streams catchment. Together these catchments cover a large proportion of the National Park (approximately 75%). The remaining 25% consists of a small area of the Swale, Ure, Nidd and Ouse catchment, and the Tees catchment.

Emerging in the uplands, the Rivers Rye and Derwent and their tributaries rise on the moorland plateau, flowing south through the Vale of Pickering to eventually reach the Humber. Whilst largely free of marine influence, the Derwent does have some connectivity to the North Sea via the man-made Sea Cut near Scarborough. These rivers support a number of riparian species such as Eurasian Otter, European Dipper and bat communities, along with notable aquatic species including the scarce Yellow Streak Mayfly, Brown Trout, Lamprey species, and European Eel.

The Esk rises between Baysdale and Westerdale, where it flows 45km through the National Park, and out to the North Sea. There are 6 coastal stream waterbodies associated with the Esk catchment that flow direct into the North Sea. They provide important connectivity between coastal, intertidal, and terrestrial habitats. The River Esk

is Yorkshire's only principal Atlantic Salmon river and home to other nationally important species such as Sea/Brown Trout, European Eel, Brook Lamprey, Water Voles, and Eurasian Otters. The River Esk is also home to the critically endangered Freshwater Pearl Mussel.

Access and Recreation

The National Park's second purpose is to promote opportunities for public understanding and enjoyment of the North York Moors' special qualities. Natural habitats and landscapes have been shown to be vital for supporting well-being and public health[4]. The National Park is ideally placed to provide vital opportunities for residents and visitors to access and engage with natural spaces, to learn about and treasure our natural environment and to boost health and wellbeing. It is therefore crucial that opportunities are taken to deliver nature recovery in spaces that are already accessible to people, but also to enable more access to spaces that are rich in wildlife where this is appropriate.

National Trails, such as the Cleveland Way and the Coast to Coast, and other priority public access routes have the potential to provide excellent corridors for wildlife as well as people. It is envisaged that the North York Moors National Park will become instrumental in providing accessible nature, to lift the Nation's health and wellbeing. Promoted public rights of way and National Trails will provide accessible, nature rich corridors for wildlife and people, whilst all residents in the National Park will have access to nature rich spaces near their homes. Recreation activities should be sustainable and have a low or negligible impact on areas of ecological importance.

Further details of the National Park Authority's plan for improving access, recreation and wellbeing through nature can be found in the Health and Wellbeing Strategy which is available on the Authority's website.

Current and Anticipated Pressures

- Many of the important species and habitats within the National Park are particularly vulnerable to climate change. There is growing concern that species such as Merlin will be pushed higher up the moors as average temperatures rise, potentially resulting in loss of these species as the moorland elevations are not high enough for them. In the 1980s the average altitude for a Merlin nest was 265m. In the late 2010s, the average altitude was 335m.
- Changing weather patterns are likely to result in longer droughts, which come with an increased wildfire risk, or more intense periods of rainfall, increasing risks of landslips and soil erosion. These pressures may lead to some habitats becoming less economic or undesirable to sustain, whilst shifts in societal priorities in response to climate change are also likely to lead to significant changes in land use across parts of the National Park in coming decades.

[4] Richardson, P. M., Maspero, M., Golightly, D., Sheffield, D., Staples, V., Lumber, R., (2016) Nature: a new paradigm for well-being and ergonomics. Ergonomics 60 (2) 291-305

- Out of the National Park boundary, development pressure has the potential to further erode links between the National Park and nearby partner Protected Landscapes. The Yorkshire Dales is only 30km east of the North York Moors, and migratory wildlife could easily move between the two protected landscapes if well connected by areas of suitable habitat. Increasing urbanisation and intensive agriculture along the A1(M) corridor exacerbates the fragmentation of the National Park network and isolates the North York Moors and its wildlife. New development on the fringes of the National Park reduces connectivity outside of the boundary and has the potential to increase light pollution which could degrade the dark sky qualities of the National Park.
- Market dynamics and low profit margins will influence the farmed environment. Uncertainties surrounding the future of farming subsidies, particularly in relation to upland farming, may change the landscape of farming within the National Park. This may provide additional opportunities for biodiversity and nature conservation leading to an increase of rich habitats for nature, or it may limit ambition and constrain farmers and land managers leading to the loss of existing valuable habitats which are maintained by agricultural activities.
- Current funding options to enable conservation focussed organisations to support delivery of biodiversity enhancement at scale are typically relatively short term. Whilst this allows funders to spread their support, the approach can limit job tenure for talented and experienced staff, leading to staff turnover and interruption to long term relationships with communities and stakeholders. The availability of funding options that can support activity over a realistic long term timescale to achieve real landscape change would enable strong partnerships with local communities to form, building in opportunities to further a sustainable legacy and ongoing monitoring of outcomes.