

## New Forest National Park - Natural England and the wasted EU Funds.

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[Envirowatch.Eu](http://www.envirowatch.eu)

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*When we won a battle in the European courts of Justice in 2005 (Case C-6/04), the EU ruled against the UK for not properly carrying out monitoring and surveillance of European Protected Species. Nearly 10 years ago now, the problem was the acute lack of surveillance in UK nature conservation. Here again is yet another a classic example, in this case European species and habitats under threat from a similar misadventure to those used in evidence previously. Not enough is known about the species and habitats in the New Forest, yet management work goes on changing the environment in an unrecorded manner. This time Natural England are well and truly at the wheel.*

The New Forest conjures images of chocolate boxes, lavender-gifts, shortbread biscuits with pictures of ponies gently grazing. A thatched cottage sells ice cream to happy campers on holiday. The reality however is more the idiot job hacking around the New Forest roads in an untaxed car, knocking over deer and ponies as modern recreation wakes up England's sleepest beauty spot. Since 2005 it has been zoned as a National Park :

<http://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/info/20001/visiting>

It also has SSSI, RAMSAR and other designations, the vast area needs protection from a burgeoning range of new threats and many of them it now seems are not just founded in public ignorance and carelessness but in the supposed guardians of our countryside.

This story of self-inflicted wounds begins with English Nature and now Natural England dishing out large slabs of Euro-cash, in the form of Higher Level Stewardship grants:

<http://www.hlsnewforest.org.uk/>

£ Million and Millions for more than a decade. These have gone somehow heavily to a government body; the Forestry Commission who seem to grumble about how the Forest is not a serious commercial proposition any more, but are nevertheless sweetened with big machine contracts

This is something HLS is not actually allowed to do, giving money to a government body; so much of the dosh is filtered on paper via the Verderers. These are the often dark historic and notoriously difficult local forces (Dad's Army x Vicar of Dibley's church committee x Alan B'stard) many with friends who trouser a hefty sum for each cow or pony 'turned out' in what has become Britain's largest open -air cattle, pony and deer ranch. Anything old or needing more than a quick look by a vet heads of as cheap French burger meat:

[http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/10167038.Are\\_we\\_eating\\_New\\_Forest\\_pony\\_in\\_our\\_burgers/](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/10167038.Are_we_eating_New_Forest_pony_in_our_burgers/)

The deal is brokered by NE who has the unenviable task of conserving amongst the awkward stakeholders. NE like a good farming story and support the turning of the New Forest into a paddock because the Euro-registered 'grazing lawn' habitat fits with its agri-style approaches and is less trouble than managing other types of habitat at a few Euro's more per hectare. All good post-crash economic sense. The influx of spending money beyond paying for ponies and cattle to be let loose, is directed at generally blocking waterways to stop bogland draining but the more obvious projects ran out ages ago and now it seems, it is doing the ecological equivalent of digging holes in the road in order to fill them in again, hoping no-one is looking.

While a handful of sites to the south of the forest have 'worked', where historic draining damaged wet heathland, the move north and towards the back of the list has hit areas that don't warrant work, that are highly sensitive and were little more than names on a list at the start. In the north of the forest, several of the most valued streams and beauty spots, some rich in fish and damselfly biodiversity are being targeted for 'repairs' of a kind that are sending the local archaeologists, geological and ecological experts spare. Many areas have been so heavily impacted that it is only their remoteness that prevents a media scrum to see the churned up folly that results.

None of this registered on the slick New Forest HLS websites where everything looks perfect although well - there isn't really any detail. If you look at the Jonathan Cox Associates report for evidence of scheme success they say, well.... that they cherry picked the best examples when reporting. So don't look to hard then? Oddly schemes can spend up to 5% on determining outcomes but usually under 1% gets spent:

<http://www.hlsnewforest.org.uk/hls/site/index.php>

Local people who are up in arms and who do not so much have their hands in the Verderers pot are the main people who stretch out daily as the Forest's 'eyes and ears', on horseback and with dogs and who appreciate the ancient habitats as their back garden. They notice when the Forestry Commission blows up a wheatear nest clearing old flares or chops trees and scrub during the bird nesting season amongst other 'field sport' activities.

Incredibly, the main promoted HLS operation is to fill the famous, well appreciated ancient and gently eroding streams to the top, plus or minus a few inches with imported clay and stone from outside. Bales of heather are also staked down with tree trunks underneath, in the most unlikely of efforts using local materials (must be good then?) to try to 'make a stream' and start again, insisting with every disastrous area ruined that 'we are learning'. No one is convinced. The work at first creates a stone path that visually any golf course would be proud of as an access track, although now stones as big as bricks are being used as things go soft and wash away.

Filled in stream – now a puree of liquid clay and rotting heather bales with a crust of dirty quarry stone on top

Stinking HLS Midge Pool – Blue-tongue anyone?

The fish, newts and insects are gone. The birds cannot feed, drink or bath and scouring along the infilled habitat creates ugly stinking pits of water where midges breed. Hurried repairs are done each year, but the unstable material unwisely placed in land that is too steep to hold and a long legacy of pollution and remediation stretches ahead. Some say it will cost £20-30 million to put right over the next 25 years. The burying of geological features that are open for study at present has been described as mindless vandalism. This is one of the features for which the SSSI was granted and several experts cannot believe Natural England paying for its loss.

Rather than stop digging in the dubious hole, NE has panicked, not wanting to be seen to be at fault or even to have to give the money back it is fighting a bitter rearguard action. Its problem is that HLS rules require work to be 'necessary for management' under legal restrictions but it cannot show this because there is inadequate data. It relies on generalities, such as "any modified stream is in unfavourable condition" to generate work. This is the crumbly fig leaf that it shows to the world. Last year it facilitated a secret independent internal report on wildlife impacts that said the work was damaging to wildlife and was not guided by good evidence.

The report apparently said that grazing policy was prioritising habitats that need grazing over other habitats and species that also require protection by law and documented Natural England's own admission that they are unable even to monitor and carry out basic recovery plans for many key species due to lack of funding. Monitoring of animals and plants is chronically unfunded. This is despite the acceptable that HLS can fund monitoring, should it wish.

The report said that the wetland restoration benefits from a range of sites including principally Latchmore were dubious. The secret report was however recently obtained by the local 'Friends of Latchmore', further up in arms at the waste of public funds and the collateral damage done by the work and now having been ignored and cut off from communications by the 'local mafia'. The report was even redacted because NE felt that it unfairly criticised members of its staff.

Friends of Latchmore <http://friendsoflatchmore.org/> have been campaigning for many years against the HLS programme and managed to get the New Forest planning body to enforce Environmental scrutiny on the larger proposals because of the extent of the potential damage. They have even had expert reports done. <http://friendsoflatchmore.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/LatchmoreNFbyLANGTON1.pdf>

Having fought and lost, with other village groups, the battle to stop permission being given for work at Wootton and Pondhead in the Forest they are now making a stand at Latchmore, the biggest proposal where and incredible 100,000 tons of clay and stone are to be lorried-in and placed in an engineering exercise of military scale this autumn.

As the legal pencils are sharpened, the hapless New Forest National Parks planners take advice from Natural England that everything is above board and rather nervously look at a wide range of people objecting, beyond the usual coterie of 'yes' bodies who get crumbs of the NE & FC tables in return for support. Several senior hydrologists and technical experts in the general south England Universities have been involved and either pulled out or have been avoided in the scrutiny of the Latchmore and other plans. Vast sums spent on tame consultants has given the FC what they need to progress and their tail seems rather

unwisely up.

At Latchmore many rare and declining species are present including a critically important population of Southern Damselfly, a wide range of fish that the Environment Agency seem to manage with a very broad brush, keeping out of the way of Natural England and the questions surrounding dubious activities surrounding movements of the delicate trout and other species before and after the 'infillings'.

As the planning application has been made with a consultation deadline of early September, the stakes are rising and Natural England, with many former agency staff already melted into the local woodwork, the set-up is more akin to an Ealing comedy in a remote Scottish island. The 'thiefdom is robust and unbreakable' said one commentator, referring also to the late Colin Tubbs comments about how things get done locally in this part of Hampshire. But that was before the injection of massive public funds to pay for grazing, including over twice the maximum recommended level of stock that English Nature said was acceptable ten years ago. Even the local stock managers are saying the Forest is over-grazed.

Local forest experts, weary of decades of New Forest management blunders see events as just one more insult to what was one of England's premier nature areas and also complain of the insult to the New Forest archaeology that is also getting harsh treatment from the plans.

<http://friendsoflatchmore.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/LT03092016.NewForestNotes.pdf>

The grazing issue will come to a head soon because of the huge biomass of heavily crowded livestock and deer-packed environment. The secret report also states that very significant diseases such as African Horse Sickness, Blue Tongue, West Nile Disease and, most imminent/already proximate; Bovine Tuberculosis – cattle are being foolishly shipped in from the west country and it is now just a matter of when. All of these threaten local livelihoods and are a consequence of Natural England's management. If stock are ravaged by disease using stagnant puddles from failed 'restorations', at huge economic cost the finger will be pointed at the management.

Even the local MP Sir Desmond Swayne, MP for New Forest West

<http://friendsoflatchmore.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/FJ01092016.DesmondSwayneRejectthisdamaging.pdf>

has joined the outcry and the Lymington Times now has regular updates ridiculing the Euro-wastage as the damaged beauty spots stack up. Even Private Eye are interested

<http://friendsoflatchmore.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/PRIVATE-EYE1425.19Augto1Sept2016.pdf>

The Friends of Latchmore are now campaigning hard to get things stopped and I appeal for people to help them. It is not too late to stop this terrible wastage and damage.

Yours in planet protection,

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