

Biodiversity plan that engages populations

wildhastings.org.uk



Involving the public in preserving habitats was the first step Hastings took with its biodiversity action plan. ARC went there to find out more about it.



UK farmland biodiversity case study, summer 2012
www.arc2020.eu

For just five kilometres of the Sussex coastline at Hastings, sandstone cliffs spill out over the Weald clay to form a series of unique habitats. Some of them have existed continuously in their present state for thousands of years. Many of these habitats are as fragile as they are rare.

Fortunately, Hastings Borough Council takes biodiversity very seriously and has implemented all but one item in its local biodiversity plan, which is a customised version of national and county strategies. More than one third of the borough's 3,000 hectares are protected habitats: 10% of the borough is woodland, much of it ancient.

Local involvement with wildlife and preserving habitats

is the foundation of the borough's biodiversity plan. The sides of some valleys in the borough are too steep for building, so ancient woodland habitats can be found alongside a dense patchwork of nineteenth and twentieth century housing. With a human population of more than 80,000, Hastings residents can only be part of the solution, not forgetting the million year-round visitors to the popular south coast resort.

The borough is completing a 10-year regeneration programme, which has seen major investments in further education campuses.

As well as regenerating the local economy, the past decades have seen extensive investments in preserving the fabric of the

Why it matters

Biodiversity is like a living glue that keeps life on the planet together.

It is the combined effect of interactions between lifeforms and habitats: it is an indivisible entity which encompasses the planet. It is most readily understood at a neighbourhood level. This is the level at which people can be involved in their living space, the level at which they can make a difference.

This is the aim of the Hastings Local Biodiversity Action Plan: since the borough is a geologically rare location, there is a high density of rare habitats.

Biodiversity matters to every living organism on the planet, because it helps us to understand where the next breath of air, the next drink of water, the next meal will come from. And, with either luck or good judgement, the one after that. Or not, as the case may be.

For instance, half the oxygen we breathe is produced by green plankton in the world's oceans. We do not need to know that for it to keep us alive, but it certainly changes how we need to think about the ocean, let alone the living spaces which are readily accessible to terrestrial life.



Picture: Hastings Borough Council

Understanding biodiversity cannot begin too young.

local landscape for the borough's smaller populations.

The result is that Hastings Borough Council has designated seven Local Nature Reserves (LNR), four of which are directly managed by the Council, two by Sussex Wildlife Trust and one is privately owned and managed. The borough is also host to three Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a European Special Area of Conservation (SAC) at Hastings Cliffs.

This 183-hectare SAC is designated as one of the finest examples of soft sandstone cliffs in northern Europe. Its constantly crumbling clay outcrops are home to a very diverse flora and fauna, some of which are rare. The combination of a south-facing aspect and soft, raked back faces make the site an ideal home for creatures that need burrows or the brackish water pools that form in the long foreshore. This zone also protects the foot of the cliffs from direct erosion by the sea, which is slowed but not halted.

Within the Hastings LNR is 150 acres of farmland at Place Farm, Fairlight, which sits on high ground overlooking the sea. The fragile sandy topsoil is recovering from over-intensive dairy farming practices.

Today, the borough manages it for agriculture (cereals plus livestock) and biodiversity. Ten



Murray Davidson: diversity and wildlife returning to meadows.

years ago, this lowland acid grassland was saturated with high levels of plant nutrients. Grass monocultures had displaced naturally-occurring plants, such as heath bedstraw, a variety of vetches, clovers and sheep's sorrel, as well as the delicate grasses that support small farmland bird species.

During a sunny break in a wet summer, Environment and Natural Resources Manager Murray Davidson took ARC web correspondent Peter Crosskey to see the profusion of wildflowers and wildlife that are returning to these pastures. "A commercial

rye grass field would be really high by now, but it would only feed livestock, with its high volume yield. Our regime of low density stocking levels for cattle and sheep and rotating fields so that in some years none are grazed is resulting in a return to more traditional lowland pastures, rich in wildlife. We have seen farmland bird numbers such as linnet, yellow-hammer and tree sparrow numbers increase. The fields now also have a rich small mammal population which has attracted barn owls back to breed on site."

Here, the pasture is a mosaic of different plants, thriving in thin soil that would not support commercial fodder crops. Once the wild flowers have set seed in this field, it will be lightly grazed by a small herd of Sussex cattle, which are being finished for beef.

The national target is to re-establish 500 hectares of this grassland. Geology means that there are a limited number of places where it can occur: Hastings is home to a significant part of the national biodiversity target.

Public access to farmland is protected with extensive rights of way. The gates carry noticeboards explaining what is going on in the fields beyond. The aim is to accommodate all stakeholders: Hastings residents, wildlife and the



Local residents and visitors to Hastings constantly use this space.

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Single Farm Payments help Hastings to win battle for biodiversity

The Agricultural and Rural Convention



The way Single Farm Payments will be allocated in coming years is crucial to the future of projects like the Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve. Here, 150 hectares of farmland is still recovering from the effects of intensive dairy farming that stopped 10 years ago. Overlooking the sea, Fairlight Place Farm is owned by Hastings Borough Council and has been managed directly for the past decade.

It is a special place because, along just five kilometres of coastline, the Weald sandstones outcrop at the sea, generating habitats in places that have survived unchanged for as long as 5,000 years. More than one third of the 3,000 hectares that make up the Hastings borough are protected habitats of one sort or another: 10% of the borough is woodland, of which a lot is ancient woodland.

Living alongside this natural treasure chest is an urban population of around 80,000 or more, many of



Map: Hastings Borough Council

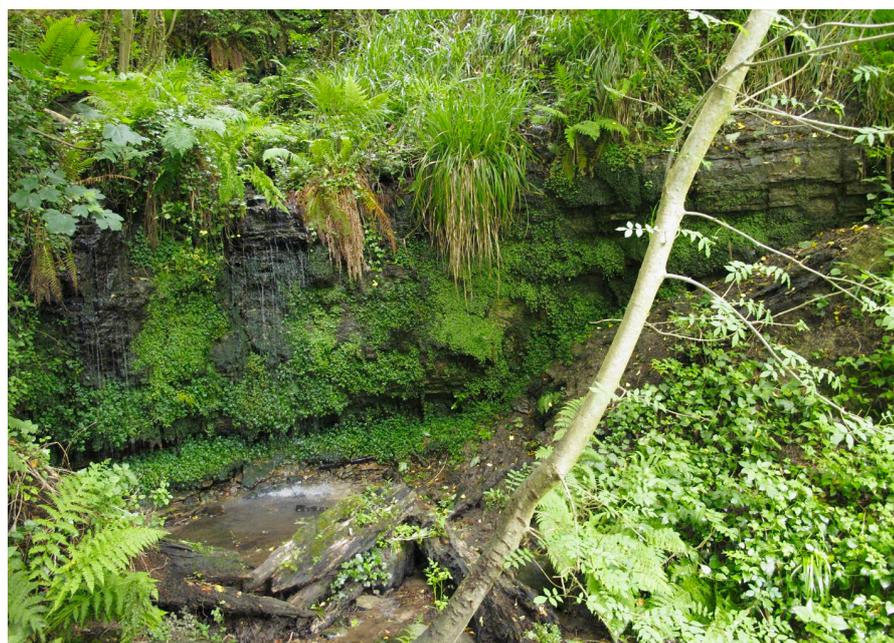
whom arrived from London in the 1960s. It is densely populated area for such an environmentally sensitive area. Hastings Borough Council has risen to the challenge of meeting the needs of local residents, local wildlife and the thousands of visitors that come to this biodiverse haven. Councillor Birch, Leader of Hastings Borough Council explained, 'The Council recognises a healthy natural environment

is essential to our economic prosperity, health and well-being. Managing a high quality nature reserve next to such a large urban population has its challenges, but we are firmly committed to ensuring access to nature is one of the cornerstones of our management.'

In-house expertise

As the only borough in East Sussex with its own in-house ecology expertise, Hastings has worked very hard to ensure that this natural wealth is both protected and yet still remains accessible for both residents and the half million visitors every year who stay in or around the borough during the tourist season. "There is probably another half million visitors a year coming from the (Old Town of Hastings) opposite end of the reserve," observes Environment and Natural Resources Manager Murray Davidson, who looks after the borough's green spaces. 'Indeed, Hastings Country Park and Farm probably attracts more visitors than any other green space in the Borough'.

The Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve is criss-crossed with rights of way and covers 267 hectares, which includes the 150-hectare Fairlight Place Farm. This in turn



Fairlight Glen: thousands of years as a wet woodland habitat.

is directly over the borough's most precious Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) Fairlight Glen. This ancient glen habitat has a very stable microclimate and attracts scientists from all over the UK and further afield to study its uniquely diverse flora and fauna.

High plant nutrient levels

The runoff from the farm came close to destroying the ecology of the glen during the closing years of the twentieth century, as slurry from scores of cattle found its way in to the watercourse. Even now, years later, the field below the old slurry tank is still thick with patches of nettles, their roots seeking out remaining nutrients.

At the turn of the century, Hastings Council acted to save Fairlight Glen from ecological disaster, buying out the tenant farmer in Fairlight Place Farm, before implementing a recovery plan for the site. As things stand, Single Farm Payments of around GBP 20,000 a year is applied to defray the fixed costs of the farm, while a similar sum in Countryside Stewardship funding helps with the running costs. If changes to the CAP were to bar local authorities from claiming



Effective bracken control with light grazing.



Highland cattle form part of the bracken control team.

SFPs, the whole project could very rapidly be in jeopardy.

Councillor Birch explains, "Taking the farm back into direct management allowed us to develop a sustainable management plan for the whole area to conserve the biodiversity of the designated areas, provide access for residents and visitors and manage the farmland to promote biodiversity.

Challenges

"This meant the residents of Hastings and St Leonards had one of the largest and highest quality nature reserves in the South East of England right on their doorstep. Integrating a former intensively managed farm with a nationally designated and internationally designated Special Area of Conservation has not been without its challenges. This management would simply not have been possible without the subsidies we currently attract."

"The farm is run for agriculture and biodiversity," explains Murray Davidson. "It is very popular locally: people came specially to see the Exmoor ponies when we had them up here and local residents are involved in practical conservation projects around the nature reserve, as they are at other conservation sites around the borough.

"It is true to say we could not have turned this site around from

one where, habitats and species were in decline to a site that boasts flora rich grazed meadows, and arable fields that are managed to provide as much food and shelter for wild birds and invertebrates without the dedication of our volunteers, our Friends of Hastings Country Park group and the hard work of all our staff. We now receive an annual Green Flag Award as a recognition the site is one of the



Exmoor ponies are popular with Hastings residents.

best green spaces in the Country.” The farmland on this site is very fragile. The topsoil is very thin, lying on top of clay: in winter, anyone venturing out with a vehicle in the fields would sink through the light, water-soaked topsoil and get stuck in the underlying clay.

It cannot be expected to compete with capital-intensive operations on more robust land. But that is not to say that it lacks commercial organisation.

Light grazing

Today, livestock is brought in to keep bracken under control with a mix of Sussex and Highland longhorn cattle, with overwintering sheep when the nights draw in. The livestock grazes in meadows where plant and wildlife diversity is steadily returning and the finished animals are slaughtered later in the year.

With the livestock areas fully fenced and secured, the arable belt across the top of the farm is undergoing a similar rolling management programme. As well as working with a local grazier for the livestock, the borough sets out a cropping plan for the arable areas, which is implemented by contractors. “We agreed to denser plantings in return for wider field



Picture: Hastings Borough Council

Reinstating fencing to manage grazing was an early priority

margins,” Davidson added. With broad bands of open ground around crop plantings, birds such as skylarks have started nesting successfully once again. And to have peregrine falcons nesting in the borough would not happen without a fully functional food chain.

Bird populations recovering

‘We have found through annual bird monitoring our numbers of farmland birds such as linnet, tree sparrow and yellow hammer are all increasing in numbers due to our management.’

Once the holiday season draws to a close, Hastings Borough Council will

once again start scanning the skies over Brussels for signs the new CAP will help Fairlight Place Farm to stay on the road to recovery. Over one million visitors a year and residents vote for Hastings Natural History Reserve with their feet: the notion of biodiversity both engages and involves a significant proportion of the borough’s urban population. It is this bedrock support that earns Hastings so many Green Flag Awards and recognition for making the transition from access to involvement.

Flying the flag: Hastings Rangers are proud of their achievements.



Picture: Hastings Borough Council

Wildlife is a Hastings buzz word

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agricultural contractors growing crops or managing livestock grazing.

The margins of the cereal fields have up to 10-metre wide Wildlife Strips, comprising of sunflowers, quinoa and various seed rich plants that provide food and cover for birds in the lean winter months.

The low input cereal fields are now home skylarks, harvests mice another threatened farmland species. The arable rotation also includes setting one complete field over to red clover. This has three main benefits; the clover provides a rich nectar source throughout the summer for rare and endangered solitary bees and other invertebrates, provides a nutritious finishing fodder for sheep in the winter and its roots fix nitrogen in the soil.

There is a healthy number of volunteers, who help around the nature reserves and conservation sites. The current volunteer calendar lists weekly meetings to work on a walled garden in the town, while the main site at is full of news of wildlife sightings and surveys from around the borough.

There is also a lot of stunning wildlife close-up photography to be found on the Wild Hastings website. The high standards in a



Picture: Hastings Borough Council

Sussex cattle are helping to restore dry grassland habitats

technically tricky area of photography are a mark of many hours spent in the field over years, by a dedicated core of local naturalists. The WordPress blog has over 300 followers, which is very respectable for a local specialist publication.

The park rangers' flickr account paints a lively picture of

the community that shares the nature reserve. Get the link from the wildhastings.org.uk website.

Going further back, there has been an active natural history society in Hastings since 1893: for over a century the Hastings and East Sussex Natural History Society has an unbroken record of publishing an annual journal.

94% of residents back biodiversity strategy

The biodiversity strategy in Hastings has a lot of support in the borough and beyond. No fewer than 94% of respondents in a 2008 consultation backed the borough council's biodiversity objectives.

Government, at any level, is not structured like a business. Nor is there any reason why, for the purposes of good governance, it should be. Stakeholders have wider interests than the narrowly financial demands and expectations of shareholders in a business.

The Hastings Local

Development Framework (LDF) reflects this when it states that there is a need to redevelop existing sites, rather than build on virgin land to accommodate the needs of 86,000 local residents and the protected landscape, which is so closely woven into the borough.

The borough's natural and historic environment is a "key asset," making Hastings an attractive place to live and work in, as well as being vital to tourism in the town, planners agreed. If the borough's wildlife had a say, at least 94% would say "Yes," too.



Picture: Hastings Borough Council

Catch the bug

To find out more about Hastings wildlife, point your web browser at: <http://wildhastings.org.uk/>