



Case study 2: Gowy Meadows Grazing Project



Summary of economic and environmental impact:

- Land management designed to sustain biodiversity, using traditional breeds of cattle
- Important educational resource for Cheshire farmers, agricultural students and schools
- Flood alleviation scheme for major oil refinery
- Conservation of important animal and plant habitats

Overview

A herd of traditional cattle and sheep are doing their bit for biodiversity in the shadow of a Cheshire oil refinery.

Gowy Meadows Nature Reserve is an area of floodplain grazing marsh just south of the Stanlow oil refinery at Ellesmere Port. Every winter the land floods; in summer, left untended, communities of rarer species would be lost.

Cheshire Wildlife Trust, which manages the land, has come up with a solution that is good for rare species such as the great crested newt, good for farming, and good for the economy.

A herd of Dexter and Longhorn cattle, along with Hebridean sheep, graze the land, preventing it being colonised by invasive plant species such as rush. The wetland habitat is ideal for species such as water voles, mud snails, lapwings and the lesser silver water beetle, while networks of ditches are being restored to allow better control of the water table.

To supplement the grazing, a tractor is used to cut back rushes and purple moor grass, preventing habitats from becoming overgrown.



Project development

The origins of the project go back to 2001, when the Environment Agency called for a flood alleviation scheme for the Stanlow refinery and concluded that Gowy Meadows would provide a natural solution. The Environment Agency dug a diversion ditch but the area needed to be managed – which is where Cheshire Wildlife Trust came in.

'The land was severely overgrazed and by animals that were not native to the habitat and

very fussy about what they ate,' says Jacki Hulse, the trust's head of estates and land management. 'We decided we wanted to introduce traditional breeds and applied for money for a grazing project to purchase cattle.'

In 2006 the trust took on a conservation grazing officer to manage the 165-hectare meadows. As well as looking after Gowy Meadows, he also supervises grazing on other nature reserves owned or managed by the trust.

Funding and partners

Reaseheath College is an important partner in the scheme, using the project to train agriculture students in livestock welfare. Other partners include the landowners, Shell, and SITA Trust.

Funding for the scheme, which cost just over £115,000, came largely from SITA Trust, which paid for the cattle and tractor. Defra supported the conservation grazing officer's salary with a contribution of around £75,000 over three years.

It is hoped that by 2009 the project will be self-sustaining, with sales of animals covering the grazing officer's wages. Already sales of livestock offset half his salary.

A wide range of organisations provided match funding, including Shell and Astra-Zeneca.

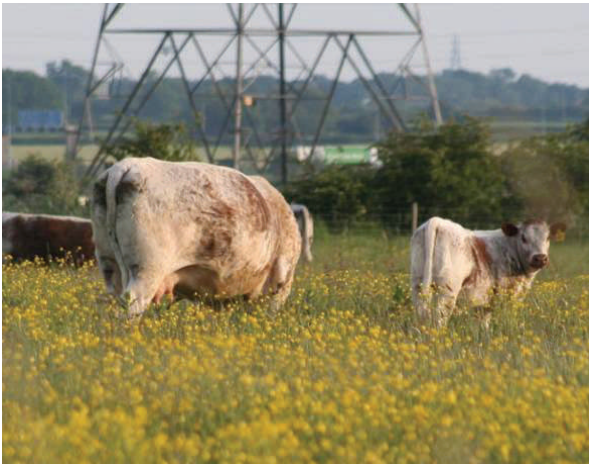
Environmental benefits

Viewed as farmland, Gowy Meadows is poor quality: the area is prone to flooding and few farmers have the time or resources to preserve such areas as grazing for traditional breeds. Draining the land completely or applying fertiliser would destroy important habitats; left unchecked, the land would be quickly overgrown.

The Gowy Meadows project enables traditional grazing patterns to continue, a practice that is becoming increasingly rare. It also offers farmers and agriculture students a chance to see how traditional grazing can be done cost-effectively.

'We have been able to show the use of traditional breeds to other land managers and have good connections with the agricultural college at Reaseheath,' Jacki says. 'That's quite important because a lot of farmers are being persuaded to use traditional breeds in farming but don't know how to do it. With the changing face of agri-





culture a lot of students are having to look at diversifying their skills.'

The herd of cows and calves is now nearly 200 strong and there is a high demand for the meat, which is known for its quality.

A wide range of people are discovering the value of this form of conservation through contact with the project. Farmers discover how to handle traditional breeds of cattle; schoolchildren and wildlife enthusiasts learn how important grazing is in preserving rare habitats; and volunteers from local businesses gain environmental knowledge

through their involvement in activities such as maintaining the reserve's fencing.

'It's an incredibly important project because it means we are able to manage our sites better,' says Jacki. 'We're using animals more and more as a management tool and we loan cattle out to other land managers. It's more important than we ever envisaged it would be.'

Economic benefits

• Labour productivity

This is the key benefit from the Gowy Meadows Grazing Project. Not only does Cheshire Wildlife Trust directly employ a worker to manage the scheme, but the encouragement of traditional farming techniques also offers farmers an opportunity to diversify, preserving agricultural jobs.

• Products from the land

The grazing project has presented an opportunity to produce premium quality meat from traditional breeds. As consumers become more demanding and aware of the environmental impact of their spending, sales of such meat are likely to increase.

• Health and wellbeing

Gowy Meadows is within a short distance of large urban centres, and Cheshire Wildlife Trust has provided a wide range of opportunities for volunteers.

• Quality of place

Because Gowy Meadows is in an area that has been heavily used by industry, it also plays a useful role in improving the quality of place and – potentially – increasing the value of the land.

• Flood alleviation and water management

By restoring networks of ditches to allow control of the water table and providing traditional grazing of invasive species, the scheme fulfils an important role in flood alleviation and water management. As weather patterns change this kind of project is likely to be seen as a cost-effective response to climate change.

• Land and biodiversity

In the long term, there are opportunities to promote the project as a showcase for biodiversity, encouraging tourism and recreation as well as research and education.

Pictures

The pictures show the grazing herd at Gowy Meadows. Pictures courtesy of Cheshire Wildlife Trust.

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