

Just how much heath do we really need? And more importantly: Why?

It is happening all over the place. From East Anglia to Dorset, from Surrey to Hertfordshire, heath restorations are being carried out with vigor and determination. It is absolutely essential, we keep being told, that we restore our heathland. We hear it from the press, the environmental organizations, the councils, the government.

Heath restoration projects always seem to follow the same regime and appear to be completely untouchable by questioning of their actual benefit or justification. Attempts to stop them are like hitting a brick wall. (1) They are planned, pushed and promoted by our government via departments Natural England, Defra and JNCC, with some very generous funding made available for the environmental organisations (usually the Wildlife Trusts, but also the RSPB or the National Trust) carrying out the work. Higher Level Stewardships (EU funding for agri environmental projects, allocated for heath restorations by Natural England), the Heritage Lottery and organizations like WREN have been some of the main financiers of heathland creations.

The often heard argument as to how much heath we have lost during the last 100 years is a debatable one when considering that 100 years ago, our country's woodland cover was at its absolute lowest (so far) with only 7 %. We can't claim to have recovered from this in a major way with today's meager 10 % cover (in England), out of which about a third consists of non native coniferous plantations for harvesting. The high point in heath existence does not coincide with our low point in woodland for no reason: We only ended up with large open areas because our ancestors cut down the 90 % woodland cover that existed before. So the heath established itself as a result of this initial intervention (loss of the trees meant also loss of the fertile forest soil and exposure of the sandy/chalky soils underneath) and the subsequent management – land use for grazing, crop growing and harvesting of bracken and other vegetation controlled nature and stopped it from doing what it would naturally try to do:

The process called “succession” means a gradual return from open ground to increasingly taller plants, eventually trees, and later forest. It has only been since grazing or other management to keep vegetation short have decreased, that nature was able to reassert itself to a degree in some of those erstwhile open areas and start re-growing the plants that were there before. So while it is true that we have a lot less heath areas today than we did 100 years ago, it is also true to say we had an disproportionately large amount of this habitat in the past.

None of this seems to ever enter the argumentation for us – apparently - needing to return to our past of open habitats. **Despite being still in a state of deforestation (2), and therefore, one might think, grateful for any native woodland to re-grow, the degree of determination for us to “turn back the clock” to our most deforested point in natural history is impressive to say the least.** In England for example, there are specific and ambitious current targets as to how much of our existing heathland needs to be “restored” to a

sufficiently satisfactory conservation status (12,762 ha), and how much additional heathland needs to be created (7,600 ha).

Targets like these do not just appear out of nowhere, so the question as to where they originate, and why, is an obvious one to ask – but not an easy one to answer. The fact that I came across statements like “The UK has an internationally binding commitment to restore our heathland” (by no other than the Woodland Trust!) got me even more intrigued (3).

It was by looking up where our much mentioned BAPs (biodiversity action plans) originate that I happened to find that international connection - and it wasn't in a place I had expected it. According to the definition on Google, BAPs are “The UK's answer to implement the targets of the CBD”. CBD being the UN ***Convention on Biological Diversity***, which was first held in Rio in 1992, and again in 2010 in Nagoya, Japan. The convention wants to achieve the following:

Conservation of biological diversity
Sustainable use of the components of biological diversity
Fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources.

I decided to take a closer look into this rather ambitious set of targets at a later point, but for now my eye was caught by a sentence I found in the CBD's country profile for the UK:

“The UK has habitats and species that are of global significance, for instance the UK has approximately 13% of the world's blanket bog and 20% of Europe's lowland heathland”. With heathland only occurring within Europe, this means that in fact we hold 20% of the world's resource of this habitat. (4)

While I was not expecting that this global convention went as far as to specifically determine how many hectares of our heathland is deemed necessary to be restored or created, the fact that this is only one of two of our habitats mentioned as being of global importance is no doubt significant – especially as **delivery of the convention's set of targets became the core of our environmental policy after signing up to the first CBD in 1992**. Our list of priority habitats (heathland being one of them) and biodiversity action plans for instance were the direct consequence of the convention.

Much to everybody's disappointment, the second Biodiversity Convention in 2010 had to admit defeat on all counts, as none of the targets of Rio had been met, and loss of biodiversity was progressing at its alarming rate. The set of targets laid out in the second convention in Nagoya was trying to impose more pressure on the participating nations, the number of which had increased from the former 150 to 192 signing up to the legally binding convention.

The UK responded to the increased pressure by putting a much more integrated strategy in place, the *Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework*, produced by JNCC and Defra. This was “developed in response to the CBD's Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and to achieve the Biodiversity Targets” of the *EU*

Biodiversity Strategy (Europe's own action plan in answer to the targets of the CBD). (5)

An interesting paragraph describes that this **Biodiversity Framework "identifies where work ... contributes to international obligations. In total, 23 areas of work have been identified where all the countries have agreed that they want to contribute to, and benefit from, a continued UK focus."** (6)

A continued UK focus, which, one has to realize, does not only exist on a global, but also on a EU level: The EU has had the heathland habitat on the conservation radar since 1992 when it became part of the *EU habitats directive* (7).

A whole network emerges of international strategies, expectations and pressures. What does all this mean in a bigger context for our environmental policy? What has happened since 1992 is nature conservation on a national level becoming increasingly streamlined in accordance with international conventions and directives, above all the CBD. **Our country's environmental policy has been fundamentally influenced by the convention's targets, the implementation and delivery of which having become the deciding aspects and driving powers for what type of nature we conserve and in what way.**

Embedded in the UK's *Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework* are our countries' individual strategies for target delivery, like the *Biodiversity 2020* strategy for England, which shows commitment and determination on all levels:

"Defra, on behalf of HM Government, will be accountable for overall delivery of the strategy. Natural England will be the lead statutory body for delivery on the ground, through with many partners assisting with this..... involving statutory, voluntary, academic and business sectors, and the public." (8)

A fit for purpose policy that will ensure we will be able to cope with present and future demands from the international environmental directives.

One of the problems with these internationally determined targets is that they do not leave any room for maneuvering on a local level. **Once committed, it's all about delivery, and, like in our heathland example, the one-fits-all strategy will be so focused on quantities that any discussion as to whether what we are pursuing is really the sensible option simply won't happen.**

Interesting also to bear in mind that the basis for the heathland conservation efforts, whether on a national or international level, always seem to lie in the comparison of how much of this habitat existed in the past to how much there is today. A decline dictates action must be taken and the level of decline dictates the extent of this action. Here is a thought experiment: Imagine for a moment that our ancestors had been less diligent in cutting down trees and getting rid of almost all of our woodland, or had used the land in a different way, and that we had therefore never had such a large amount of open habitats like heathland - then the idea to strip us of considerable amounts of woodland in favor of creating more open habitat would seem simply ludicrous. We would consider

ourselves lucky to have a decent amount of trees, would look after whatever heathland we still might have, but not be under pressure to "go back" to there being much larger quantities of it. Rather unfortunately through for those of us who love trees, our natural history lends itself to making us one of the main suppliers of open, semi natural habitats rather than woodlands.

One can't help but wonder how much more heathland we are ultimately going to have to create, and whose decision this actually is?

Does "restoring our heathlands" mean going back to when it was at its peak? There are even tools available like the "East Anglia heath opportunity mapping project" to enable the identification of possible sites to work on (9), and an East Anglia map published by Defra on "land character" displays a staggering amount of heathland in areas which at present are not heathland at all, like the whole of Thetford forest. A vision for our future? (10)

A continued deforestation in favor of open habitats like heathlands was also confirmed in a 2009 survey carried out by the Forestry Commission into how many hectares of Public Forest Estate could be "restored" to open habitat over the coming 20 years, with an additional 12,515 ha having already been allocated, and a further 36,958 ha possible. (11)

A lot of questions are still unanswered, but some aspects have at least become more transparent:

The reason why we have been seeing the results of such a determined and relentless heath restoration campaign nationwide is not that we have so worryingly little of it (we have, proportionally, actually a lot) - it is much more the response to pressures on a global level, which have categorized heathland as a habitat of international importance, and the UK as one of the primary suppliers for it.

It is also clear why we have been hearing the same rhetoric praising heath restorations as utterly essential from just about everywhere and everybody, in accordance with the "integrated strategy" – the statutory, voluntary, academic and business sectors. The public appears to be the only unknown factor in well planned target delivery, therefore considerable effort has been made to preempt protests on a large scale.

It is finally also very obvious why such large amounts of funding have found their way to our heath restoration projects from the EU (via agri-environment funding), who is not only keen to meet their own Habitats Directive targets but also to deliver their obligations to the CBD.

And what about our NGOs? In the globally orientated super-strategy, they have come to play a crucial role, helping with educating the public according to the directives from above, and being the facilitators for the agreed environmental programs. The reward for their full cooperation is multi faceted: Carrying out

projects like heath restorations not only keep the generous funding rolling in, and bring secured employment, growth and increase in power and influence, they also mean a lot of PR and a hefty ego boost: **Everything about a heath restoration is big impact, man made change followed by controlled management. Human intervention at its fullest, so to be able to take full credit for these, as we keep being told, “hugely important” environmental projects are opportunities none of these organizations could afford to miss out on.**

Even the Woodland Trust has been integrated into the strategy, and has been focusing their efforts of conservation on our “ancient woodland” – which they define as older than 300 years, therefore older than any of the woodland growing on former heath sites. This, conveniently labeled “secondary woodland” is often referred to as not particularly valuable – like some second class type of habitat that is not worthy of protection. How we are ever supposed to increase our resource of ancient woodland (in fact, *any* kind of woodland) if we do not allow younger woodland to mature is anybody’s guess. (12)

It is surprising that the powers and wider context that are driving our environmental strategies are largely unknown to anybody not directly involved with the environmental industry – or maybe not so surprising as the public might take issue with the fact that the decisions over how our country deals with our environment have not been made by us alone for a long time.

Our environmental policy reformed to a strategy to implement international directives, with nobody noteworthy taking issue, interfering, questioning. Streamlined and efficient it may be – but that does not make it right.

In the meantime, and unnoticed by many, the CBD is extending its influence on our relationship with nature in other, possibly even more troubling ways - but this will be the topic of the next article.

(1) http://www.self-willed-land.org.uk/heath_madness.htm

(2) <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/dec/06/england-deforestation-state-lack-tree-planting>

(3) <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2018/01/heathland-restoration/>

(4) <https://www.cbd.int/countries/>

(5) http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/pdf/UK_Post2010_Bio-Fwork.pdf

(6) <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=6189>

(7) http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/pdf/20yrs_brochure.pdf

(8) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69446/pb13583-biodiversity-strategy-2020-111111.pdf

(9) [https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-ee-heathland-mapping-report.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-ee-heathland-mapping-report.pdf](https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-ee-heathland-mapping-report.pdf/$FILE/eng-ee-heathland-mapping-report.pdf)

(10) <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20080604180931/http://www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/docs/eastchapter/east11/default.htm>

(11) [https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-open-habitats-evidence-survey.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-open-habitats-evidence-survey.pdf](https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-open-habitats-evidence-survey.pdf/$FILE/eng-open-habitats-evidence-survey.pdf)

(12) <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2018/01/heathland-restoration/>

Finally, is is no wonder anymore why we have seen such a broad heath restoration campaign, complete with “education” of the public to love their heath, something that offers little comfort in light of seeing some much loved and

