

## Restoring diverse grassland: what can be achieved, where, and what will it do for us?

### **Workshop 3: Making it worthwhile – fitting into a business, ecosystem service benefits, connecting with consumers and taxpayers**

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The title of the workshop provided a strong steer in favour of dividing the discussions up into three parts – fitting into a business, ecosystem service benefits, and connecting with consumers and taxpayers. We should, though look at these elements as part of a more complete rationale for the management of diverse grasslands – to ensure their management can be sustained in the longer term, they have to be capable of satisfying some specific demands, or occupying a unique niche such that people continue to consider it appropriate to subsidise them, or invest in what they are producing.

#### **Fitting into a business.**

Business considerations include

- Getting the right level of financial incentive into Agri-Environment. This directly affects farmers' perception of a financially acceptable option, but is contingent on constraints on the method of calculating the incentive. These constraints are determined by Defra, Government, EU, and the WTO, so can be difficult to manipulate, and making them responsive to market vagaries is not as simple as it might appear.
- Farmers, as business people, need to be assured of a long term commitment. At present there is a strong possibility that ES will be subject to changes in the near future; whilst current ES agreements will be honoured, a 'rollover' agreement does not look likely for all options. [Contrast with the need for farm businesses to be flexible enough take into account the loss of opportunity to react quickly to a developing market].
- The end product for e.g. a botanically diverse meadow has a limited market (and agricultural) value, so is highly dependent on other forms of incentive. Many of the meadows we saw were exemplars of botanical diversity, but very poor for dry matter production (and therefore livestock feeding value). Possibly some value to be had from selling for specialist seed/hay.
- Many in the agricultural community are sceptical about the profitability of pursuing options for diverse grassland, particularly where field fertility may be deliberately run down. There are also concerns about constraints such as shutting-up dates, and late cutting dates which many find off-putting, since they introduce a further level of inflexibility and uncertainty into what is generally a risk-averse business.

- There has been very little development of niche markets to capitalise on what is arguably a more environmentally sustainable product (where the product is from livestock which are reared on the diverse grasslands). There has also been some negative press relating to the carbon footprint of extensive livestock rearing. There is a need to develop a wholesome and positive message from these habitats, which will depend on a consistent view as to their environmental impacts.

**Recommendations:**

- **Devise an ‘income foregone’ calculation for arable reversion grasslands that is more sensitive to the differential market pressures experienced by farmers in different regions.**
- **Consider ways of engaging better with the farming community – particularly more contact time with advisers to explain grassland restoration/re-creation options within AE. Recognise that the farming system may need to change so as to deliver the AE objectives (rather than fitting the objectives around an existing system).**
- **Environmental audit of diverse grasslands in agricultural systems.**

**Ecosystem Services**

- This can sometimes be construed as a way for ‘levering’ in a monetary value to something that is not generally bought or sold. Typical products that are discussed are carbon sequestration, as a by-product of soils which are undisturbed and high in above- and below-ground biodiversity. Enhanced water management (water quality, and also improved flood control) is also cited as a product (although the logical progression of this argument could be re-forestation).
- Food production is an ecosystem service, as is cultural heritage. In some countries there is strong public demand (including legislation) for ruminant livestock to be able to graze pastures. This satisfies people’s perceptions of what is ‘proper’ in the countryside, as well as supporting the perception of ‘wholesomeness’ of the food products.
- As seen on the field visits, a very diverse or rich grassland may have little value as a source of fodder or grazing for livestock. Some level of compromise, to enhance the value to livestock, whilst keeping most of the botanical value (a ‘halfway-house’) might increase the overall ecosystem service value.
- We should be careful to recognise the difference between public services (which will not attract payment), and private services (which might attract payment). We should also recognise that much of the agricultural industry has a net cost to the environment, and there could be a financial backlash to ecosystem services accounting.
- There is clearly a strong incentive to attain a good degree of multi-functionality from botanically diverse grasslands, so that they have a high value to a wide (and wider) diversity of people.

**Recommendations:**

- **Recognise that livestock production is an important feature of botanically diverse grassland.**

- **Conduct full audit of all ecosystem services provided by botanically diverse grasslands.**
- **Identify areas where improvements could be made to maximise overall ecosystem value (and define what mix of products that would entail).**

#### **Consumer/ taxpayer engagement**

- There is a poor understanding amongst most people of the botanical and environmental value of botanically diverse grasslands. For many this requires a degree of education to raise awareness of what is there. The poorer the appreciation of the resource, the harder it will be to argue for taxpayers to contribute to its upkeep.
- Apart from being a scarce resource which can play a vital part in contributing to the country's biodiversity commitments, the creation and maintenance of diverse grasslands can provide a link to our understanding of the countryside throughout recent history, and also work on a cultural level.
- Access to botanically diverse grasslands, or at least the ability to see them easily could be an important consideration in public engagement. Whilst enthusiasts/ specialists may be able to appreciate them, the effort required to see some of the more out-of-the-way fields could be problematic if we had to prove their value to the public.
- At present botanically diverse grasslands have not been 'marketed' as being of public benefit. Apart from their cultural value, they could be seen as providing health benefits: there is some evidence to support the view that a greater species diversity in grazed forage can be expressed in raised levels of some vitamins and omega fatty acids in milk and meat products (evidence is not yet conclusive).
- Many food products are marketed to appeal to sectors of society who subscribe to particular environmental or lifestyle values – for example: organic food; 'free-range' eggs; 'local' produce. The combination of an undoubted environmental asset, as well as a (potentially) more health-giving product should provide an excellent selling point

#### ***Recommendations:***

- **Further research into nutritional value of individual species, and species-rich swards. Further research into nutritional, taste and health value of meat and milk from these grasslands.**
- **Consider methods of tapping into consumer interest, and enhancing the market value of meat and milk products from diverse grasslands**
- **Improve element of public access to restoration/ recreation sites in AE agreements.**