

Strategaeth Rhostir Ynys Môn

Penderfynu dyfodol rhostir Ynys Môn

Anglesey Heathland Strategy

Deciding the future of Anglesey's heathlands

Cefnogwyd y ddogfen hon gan Bartneriaeth Rhostir Ynys Môn

This document is supported by the Anglesey Heathland Partnership



The Anglesey Heathland Partnership

The Anglesey Heathland Partnership is made up of local members from various conservation and countryside organisations. The members either manage heathland sites directly or support the heathland management indirectly through their work.

The Partnership was established in January 2003 and through this agreed Strategy, will continue to work towards the conservation and sustainable management of Anglesey's heathlands.

The members of the Anglesey Heathland Partnership are:

Countryside Council for Wales (CCW)
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
National Trust (NT)
The Welsh Assembly Government – Agriculture and Rural Affairs Department (ARAD)
Isle of Anglesey County Council
National Farmers Union
Farmers Union of Wales
Country Land Owners and Business Association
Menter Môn
Anglesey Coastal Path
North Wales Wildlife Trust (NWWT)

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Introduction

Dwarf shrub heath - “heathland” - is a distinctive landscape and wildlife habitat for which Anglesey plays a key responsibility in a national and international context. This document aims to guide the conservation, enhancement, understanding and enjoyment of this fragile heritage.

Definition

The term “heathland” refers to a mixture of elements, which together constitute the concept of heathland. They include, at its core, stands of dwarf shrub heath dominated by common heather or ling, bell heather, cross-leaved heath and western gorse, along with variable proportions of unimproved grassland, mire, scrub, bracken, bare ground, lichen crust and rock. Heathland generally develops on nutrient poor soils, sometimes in association with rocky or very wet ground.



South Stack, Holyhead

In some locations (such as exposed coastal sites or thin sandy soils) it may be a natural community but in many cases the conditions for its development are a result of millennia of human exploitation, impoverishing fragile soils. However, this long association of man and landscape has enabled rich and distinctive biological associations to develop which are now highly valued.

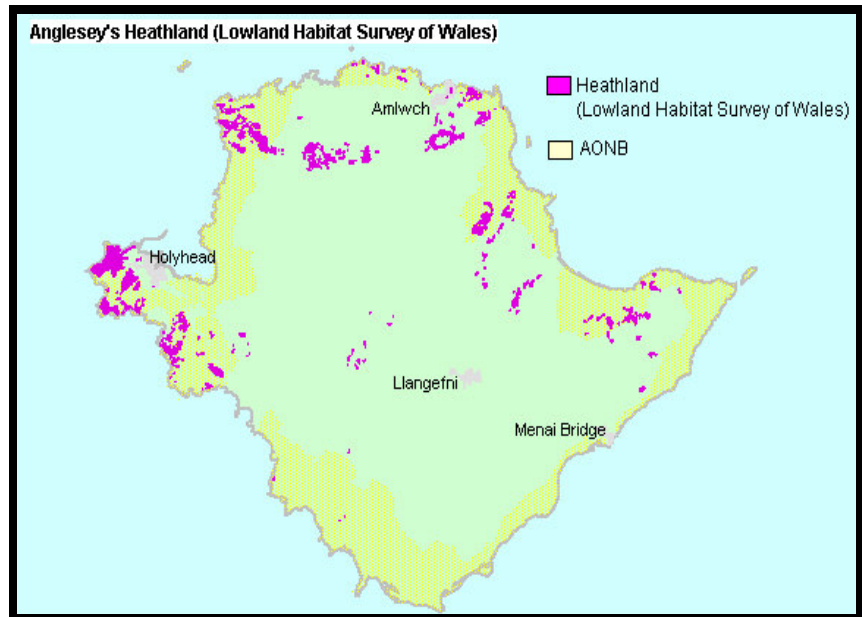
Extent and Distribution

There is no clear record of the medieval extent of heathland on Anglesey. However, interpretation of 18th and 19th century texts indicates the widespread occurrence of heaths and their integration in the agricultural economy of the time. More recently, comparison of aerial photography between 1940 and 1993 indicates a loss of 47% (Norris & Stevens 1999). Conversion to intensive agriculture and forestry are the main reasons for this loss. Urban development, mineral extraction, fire, recreational pressure and abandonment/neglect also contribute to the loss.

Anglesey currently supports approximately 900ha of lowland heathland, which represents about 7% of the semi-natural land on the island and 1.3% of the whole land surface (Williams et al. 1993). In a national context Anglesey’s heathland constitutes around 12.5% of the lowland heathland in Wales and 1.7% in the UK.

Much of Anglesey heathland is fragmented interspersed with other natural habitats and farmland. As such it has remained difficult to map accurately. However much of the known heathland is predominantly coastal, particularly on the exposed west and north coasts.

There are also significant expanses of heathland inland such as Mynydd Bodafon, Mynydd Mechell, Mynydd y Garn, and Mynydd Parys. As well as examples associated with wetlands like Cors Goch and Cors Erddreiniog. A rare heathland type is found on limestone outcrops in eastern Anglesey at Mariandyrys, Fedw Fawr, Bwrdd Arthur and Bryn Offa.



Status

On a world scale heathland is a rare habitat, with its major stronghold in Western Europe. Various heathland types are listed in Annex 1 of the EC Habitats Directive, including European Dry Heath and Northern Atlantic wet heaths with *Erica tetralix* which are found on Anglesey.

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) recognises lowland heathland as a priority habitat and sets an objective to conserve its current extent (58,000 ha) and encourage the re-creation of 6000ha of heathland across the UK by 2005. Furthermore it seeks to improve the management of all heathland currently in unfavourable condition.

In 1995 a Welsh Coastal and Lowland Heathland Forum, comprising of representatives from a variety of countryside bodies throughout Wales, was established. This initiated the development of a "*Conservation Strategy for Coastal and Lowland Heathland in Wales*". Although this document remains in a draft form it nevertheless established 6 key objectives (shown below) for heathland conservation. The aim was to achieve these objectives within 10 years and as such many of these objectives are currently being worked upon. This Strategy aims to further these objectives within the local context of Anglesey.

Objectives under the Conservation Strategy for Coastal and Lowland Heathland in Wales

1. *To compile a register of the coastal and lowland heathland resource of Wales, in terms of its ecological, landscape, historical, archaeological, cultural and educational value.*
2. *To ensure the protection of all existing examples of this endangered habitat.*
3. *To assess the potential for heathland restoration in Wales.*
4. *To encourage the reestablishment of heathland areas.*
5. *To raise public awareness and understanding of the importance and vulnerability of heathland.*
6. *To encourage public appreciation of the aesthetic, ecological, cultural, historical and archaeological value of heathlands*

Lowland and coastal heath are identified in Anglesey's Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP), with an objective:

“To prevent further significant losses of heathlands. To safeguard and restore the most important and significant areas which do not currently have protection, aiming, if possible, for restoration of about 140ha by 2007”.

Proposed actions under the LBAP include:

A programme of actions under the Anglesey Heathland Strategy.

Adequate protection of existing SSSI

Notification of new SSSI as appropriate

Suitable management of heathlands over 5ha

Review of IoACC landholdings to ensure management and restoration of heath

Provision of information and advice

Monitoring of sites

Review of Commons to identify potential for heathland LNR status

Awareness raising

Many of the best heathlands on Anglesey are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Other areas are potential SSSIs if they meet the necessary selection criteria. The high quality of heathland on the Holyhead Coast is recognised in a European context by designation as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Many areas of coastal heathland, particularly on Holy Island, provide important habitat for chough. As such the area of heathland along the coast at Rhoscolyn is designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA). Heathland around Llanddona is designated as Local Nature Reserve (LNR) and other heathland sites are proposed for LNR status. Several heathlands are protected by common land status, such as Cyttir Llandegfan, Tywyn Trewan, and others are listed as non-statutory Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) and afforded consideration in the local Unitary Development Planning policies.

Anglesey heathland is an important habitat for many threatened and protected species, such as chough, adder, silver studded blue and marsh fritillary butterflies, spotted rockrose, spathulate fleawort and golden hair lichen.

Access

There are numerous Public Rights of Way crossing Anglesey's heathlands. These provide valuable opportunities for access, exercise and recreation, as well as providing significant stretches of the Anglesey Coastal Path. Much of Anglesey's heathland is registered as Common Land. Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 most registered common land and areas of land which are predominantly "mountain, moor, heath and down", will be given a right of access from a date in 2005.



Porth Llanlleiana

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Landscape

Heathland forms an important component of the Anglesey landscape. The designation of most of Anglesey's coastline as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) affords national recognition of its coastal heathland, which contribute greatly to the scenic character of the best landscape on Anglesey. Since the AONB is a key resource underpinning the tourist industry, it follows that heathland should be recognised as a feature of that resource to be valued, protected and managed.

The distinctive landscape of heathland adds greatly to the visitor experience to these areas. The purple and gold carpet of heather and gorse crowns the late summer headlands of Anglesey's coast and hills, whilst stonechat and wren scold the walker as the wind rustles the dry papery bells of the ling.



Mynydd Bodafon

Management

Private landowners manage much of Anglesey's heathland. However organisations such as the National Trust, RSPB, North Wales Wildlife Trust, Isle of Anglesey County Council and CCW, manage most of the largest areas of heath on the island. Many individual landowners are in the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme, although heathland management is not a major component of the scheme. By early 2003 only one Tir Gofal agreement on Anglesey was pursuing heathland management targets.

Conservation bodies regard heathland as an important component of the natural environment that they wish to preserve and enhance. Heathland management is therefore integral to their overall management of sites.

Key Issues and objectives

The main aim of this Strategy is:

“to achieve the sustainable conservation of lowland and coastal heathland on Anglesey”

In order to achieve this objective, key issues have been identified and are highlighted in this section. Under each key issue objectives have been set, through which these key issues can be addressed.

Public perception

In a public opinion survey commissioned by CCW in 2001 (Beaufort Research, 2001), heathland was seen as a windswept, dark and unfriendly place. This perception is perhaps drawn from the literature of Thomas Hardy and others, or from confusion with upland moorland. Heathland is seen by many to be untamed land, not part of the enclosed farming landscape that they find aesthetically pleasing. In truth, it was very much part of the traditional farmed landscape, created by centuries of small-scale farmers.

Objectives:

- To raise public awareness and appreciation of the beauty, value and fragility of Anglesey’s heathland and the species associated with it.
- To recognise the responsibility of the Anglesey community, in respect of Anglesey’s heathland, through the Community Planning process.

Lack of sustainable management

To avoid succession to scrub or the gradual build-up of nutrients in the soil leading to grassland development, most heathland requires management. Traditionally heathlands have been cut for turf, wood fuel or burnt to promote heather regeneration and the flush of grass that follows fire. They would have also been grazed by a variety of livestock including cattle, sheep, horses and pigs. These often required high labour inputs for shepherding, especially on unfenced common land.

Today much of the heathland on Anglesey, other than that managed for conservation is viewed as unproductive marginal land. Modern agricultural systems are designed to utilise improved pasture, where fossil fuel and capital investment replaces labour. The tendency to move livestock between holdings has destroyed the hefted flocks once essential to graze difficult land. Traditional management operations, such as cutting and burning are labour intensive, and may involve skills that have been lost from the agricultural community. Concerns over health and safety and public liability discourages burning, whilst the presence of the public and their dogs alongside livestock on cliff-tops, has led to the wholesale abandonment of some coastal areas.



Heather burning South Stack

Heathland that is managed or owned by conservation bodies can often face difficulties in securing appropriate management. It is sometimes necessary for such bodies to pursue costly and time-consuming management in order to restore or maintain heathland.

Objectives:

- Promote the use of appropriate sustainable methods of management.
- To share expertise and manpower to achieve the wider use of sustainable methods of heathland management.

Grazing

Both over and under grazing present particular problems for heathland management. Under grazing is mainly due to abandonment in favour of more intensively farmed land. This can cause a lack of regeneration in the heath and permit scrub invasion. Prolonged overgrazing can damage habitat quality and even the soil structure, particularly if accompanied by supplementary feeding, making re-establishment very difficult. Both situations occur on Anglesey, however under grazing appears to be a most significant problem.

One of the reasons cited for under grazing, particularly on the coast, is a lack of grazing infrastructure. Inadequate fencing and the lack of a fresh water supply will continue to discourage some landowners from grazing these areas of heathland.



Appropriate grazing on Cors Eddrieniog National Nature Reserve

Objectives:

- Develop guidance for land managers on grazing methods which maintain heathland.
- Target existing schemes to encourage more appropriate grazing regimes.
- Investigate the potential for sharing grazing between heathland sites.
- Investigate funding opportunities, both through existing and new mechanisms, to improve grazing infrastructure on appropriate sites.

Farming practices and their economics

The Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme payments for heathland management have had limited uptake on Anglesey, although the maintenance of the habitat has been well received. The reason for the lack of interest is partly due to the heathlands being small and fragmented. Also the higher management payments offered under ESA, are insufficient to encourage farmers to carry out the additional management required. Furthermore there is reluctance from farmers to adopt labour intensive techniques outside their normal practise.

Due to the high number of ESA agreements on the island, the Tir Gofal agri-environment scheme has had limited impact. As these agreements come to an end, the number of farms joining Tir Gofal is likely to increase. Furthermore under the whole farm initiative set by Tir Gofal, farmers may adopt more positive heathland management practices in return for higher payment rates.

Objectives:

- Identify ESA agreements that impact upon heathland sites for review of the management plan or transfer to Tir Gofal
- Encourage Tir Gofal applications that may promote heathland management

Eutrophication

Heathland tends to develop on nutrient poor acid soils. Nutrient enrichment or eutrophication encourages the development of common grasses and coarse vegetation in competition with heathland species.

The spread of nutrients from, for example, fertiliser application or run-off from manure heaps can have a significant localised effect upon the nutrient balance of a heath. Atmospheric nitrogen deposition has been shown to have long term effects upon heathland development. Both factors impact on the Anglesey heathlands.

Objective:

- To monitor localised nutrient enrichment incidents and the prolonged nitrogen deposition effects on Anglesey's heathland.
- Highlight the negative effects of fertiliser application and run-off to land managers.

Access and recreation

Public access, especially with dogs has led to both real and perceived stock disturbance on coastal heath. This has encouraged abandonment of these areas in favour of enclosed land further inland. Abandonment has led to poor heathland regeneration, the development of thick grass thatch and eventually scrub invasion. The Anglesey Coastal Path and other developments may increase access pressure on the coastal heath, therefore increasing this problem. However on coastal sites which already have a lot of public access, the Coastal Path will help to define routes and may even channel walkers away from stock.

Objectives:

- To ensure that development of the coastal path does not impinge upon the continued grazing of coastal heath, especially where new permissive rights are being negotiated.
- To raise awareness of abandonment of coastal heath amongst planners and landowners and encourage, through appropriate planning and support mechanisms, the continuity of grazing on coastal heath.
- To raise / improve public awareness of the issues of public access and the grazing of coastal heath

Fragmentation

Fragmentation of heathland sites has occurred especially inland but also around the coast, where agricultural intensification tends to squeeze the heathland into narrow strips. The resulting reduction in block size makes economical management more difficult. This encourages abandonment of the fragments. Furthermore the absence of wildlife corridors increases the risk of permanent localised extinction of species, without the opportunity for re-invasion.

High priority species associated with heathland often cling to these fragmented habitats, unable to colonise wider areas. For example the Marsh Fritillary butterfly, traditionally associated with several heathlands on Anglesey, is now confined to small colonies within one or two sites.

Objectives:

- To resist developments that lead to the loss or fragmentation of heathland.
- To look for opportunities to link isolated blocks of heath by restoring former heathland or creating new heath.



Silver studded blue

The built environment

Non-agricultural development, such as new buildings, may be located on heathland, reducing the patch size and increasing fragmentation of the habitat.

Objective:

- The Ynys Môn Draft Unitary Development Plan contains the following policy on biodiversity.

“Development will only be permitted where it does not cause unacceptable harm to the biodiversity interest of Ynys Môn. Development must be designed to maintain, and where possible enhance the biodiversity of the natural environment including particular species.”

This policy is endorsed by this Strategy and will be the mechanism by which further development on heathland will be appraised.

Training

Some land managers require convincing about their ability to undertake appropriate heathland management, and also convincing about the need for sustainable management. Many of the skills of heathland stock management, turf cutting, burning etc. are lost or lie elsewhere in the community. The sharing and transfer of skills will be necessary to enable heathland site managers to perform these tasks.

Objectives:

- Identify the skill shortfalls and prepare appropriate courses, workshops or skill sharing arrangements for heathland managers.
- Work to build confidence amongst heathland managers by promoting good practice.

Partnership

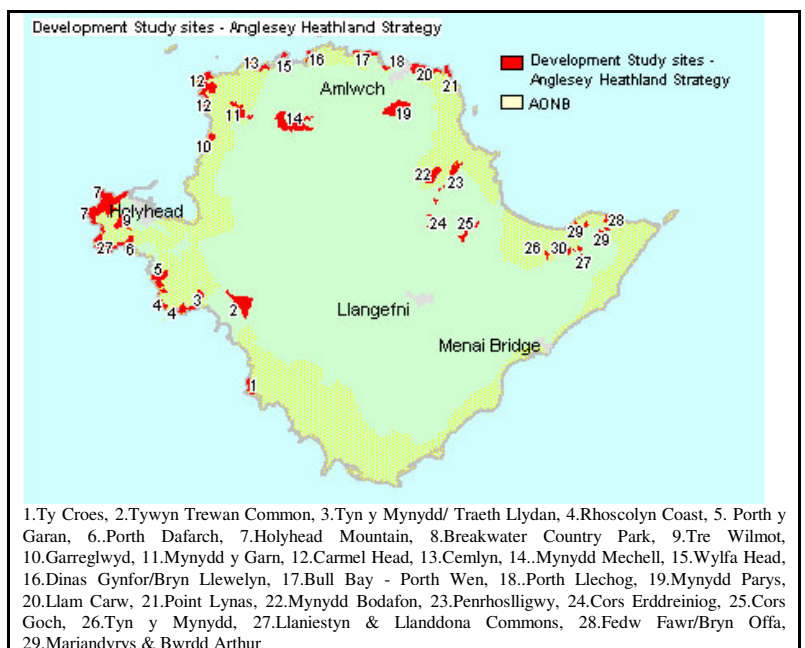
No single body or landowner can achieve the vision of furthering the conservation, enhancement, understanding and enjoyment of Anglesey's heathland. Furthermore no single body or landowner has all the skills or answers to the problems that we face. There is strength and synergy to be gained in sharing a common objective.

Objectives:

- To establish and maintain an Anglesey Heathland Partnership, for the sharing of expertise, experience and resources for heathland management.
- To develop a work programme which will take forward this Strategy.
- To investigate funding opportunities to fund the Partnership's future work programme.

Action Plan

In December 1999 a "Development Study – Anglesey Heathland Strategy – Final Report" (Cousins Environmental Consulting, 1999) was produced. This is a (600 page) inventory of 30 of Anglesey's most important heathland sites and assesses the feasibility for their management. The "Development Study" provides a draft Action Plan for the majority of heathland sites on Anglesey and in conjunction with a programme of research, monitoring, policy implementation and awareness raising activities it can be used to forward the better management of these sites.



References

Beaufort Research (2001), Perceptions of the Countryside Qualitative Research, COI/CCW Focus Groups Report. *Commissioned research report for CCW, Bangor (unpublished)*

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