

Dartmoor Forest Parish is the largest parish in Devon and covers 56,000 acres of Dartmoor, mostly open moorland. As such, Dartmoor Forest Parish Council resolved at its most recent meeting, on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2020, to oppose Natural England's intention to stop the grazing of sheep for several months at a time on the adjoining Okehampton Common and potentially other areas of Dartmoor.

Natural England's plan is short sighted and flawed, and will damage our precious moorland. Their declared intent is to allow natural vegetation to recover and appears to focus on rare and fragile plants such as wild orchids. In the first season with no grazing these may well appear. However, as has been seen on other commons, without effective grazing impenetrable ground gorse, bracken and scrub will soon choke off these delicate plants and smother the moor. It will lessen accessibility to anyone wishing to use common land, and destroy the grazing needed by the Dartmoor ponies and other animals. The scrub will cover our ancient Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age archaeology, and it's roots will destroy sensitive underground archaeological remains. It is the grazing sheep that eat the shoots of these damaging plants and protect the moor's ecological balance. To reduce the presence of sheep would dramatically upset this equilibrium and irretrievably change this precious and unique landscape.

Each year, sheep teach their lambs which areas they should graze and consider home. These are their 'lears'. Generations of sheep have grazed the same land as their ancestors through this knowledge, which is what makes hill farming practicable. There is an even density of grazing and farmers know where to find their flocks. If Natural England were to keep sheep off the moor for months at a time, this generational knowledge transfer will be lost. Dartmoor sheep would grow up in fields and centuries of 'lears' would be lost, resulting in, quite literally, 'lost sheep' on the moor during the limited time Natural England would permit them to graze.

Natural England's proposals will also damage the local economy. Farmers do not have sufficient enclosed land to graze their sheep in fields during Natural England's prohibition. This will result in smaller flocks and many farmers will find their business is no longer viable, irrespective of any short-term inducements that may be offered by Natural England. Loss of farming businesses affects the wider community as farmers rely on agricultural suppliers, machinery suppliers and mechanics, livestock markets, veterinary practices, abattoirs and other livestock services, and local shops. If farmers, farm workers and those in the supply chain are lost because of this it will also reduce the number of working age families living on Dartmoor with a knock-on effect on local schools and childrens' services.

The impact on the tourism is also clear. People visit Dartmoor to roam across access land and explore our archaeological heritage. Visit Dartmoor and Visit Devon websites and social media are full of photographs of ponies, cattle and sheep grazing in a beautiful landscape. They show pre-historic remains, mining ruins and happy walkers off the 'beaten track'. It is these attributes that are the foundation of our tourist industry. People do not visit to park in a layby and stare at a hillside of impenetrable gorse and bracken with the odd carved path through it. Dartmoor will cease to be a unique place of beauty and will begin a decline into scrubby wasteland, and tourist revenues will inevitably decline with it.

Once implemented, it will be difficult to recover from the damage Natural England's proposals would cause. Once established, it is expensive, difficult and time consuming to clear gorse, bracken and scrub.

The long-term consequences of Natural England's plans will be dire for the biodiversity, farming, the local economy and tourism on the moor, and perhaps most importantly, of the very character of Dartmoor itself. These proposals should be opposed at every opportunity.

To be send to:

Tavistock Times Gazette  
The Moorlander  
Western Morning News  
Farmer Weekly  
Dartmoor Magazine  
Natural England  
Dartmoor National Park Authority  
Duchy of Cornwall