Report From the Front Line

What's happening on moors near Sheffield

By Bob Berzins
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* Warning, contains disturbing images

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Heather burning on the Upper Don catchment

Introduction

Moorland above the city of Sheffield has the highest level of conservation protection as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for blanket bog habitat and as a Specially Protected Area (SPA) for ground-nesting birds.

These moors are privately owned but millions of pounds of taxpayers' money are being spent on their management.

This report looks at how vegetation, landscape and wildlife are suffering and how residents and businesses in Sheffield are facing increased flood risk. These moors are managed to increase red grouse numbers. Given the public subsidies involved isn't it about time that we demand clean water, flood protection and a full range of thriving wildlife?

Report author Bob Berzins is a Green Party member, lives in Sheffield and spends his time trying to preserve the landscape and wildlife of the Peak District.

Vehicle ruts beside sphagnum moss on a wet moor

Good practice?

Moors For The Future Partnership run many moorland restoration projects with the aim of making the moors much wetter with a range of vegetation, particularly mosses including sphagnum.

These mosses are vitally important because they create new peat. Blanket bog is the internationally rare habitat we have in the Peak District where peat forms thick layers over bedrock. Over decades peat has been eroded and washed into our water supplies, which is cleaned at our expense. As a legacy from the Industrial Revolution the peat also contains harmful metals absorbed from polluted air and these also have to be removed.

The photo above shows a wet moor with a range of vegetation including bright green sphagnum moss. The vegetation here will help to soak up heavy rainfall and slow the flow of water leaving the moor during spells of heavy rain. It will also help to reduce the severity and spread of wildfire in times of drought. Unfortunately a vehicle has been driven through here creating the ruts and this shows a typical lack of concern for this fragile landscape.

Dangerously flammable

This picture shows part of the devastating wildfire at Saddleworth (near Manchester) in July 2018 in an area used for grouse shooting.

Re-wetting this moor will help prevent future fires and also reduce the risk of flooding for the communities downstream.

Water supplies

As part of the drive for ever greater numbers of grouse the moors are subject to “managed burns”.

Heather burning dries out peat – the water table is lowered leading to decomposition in the upper peat layers allowing carbon dioxide to be released and this contributes to global warming.

Heather-dominated slopes, so favoured for grouse shooting, release carbon into the atmosphere because peat dries out under the vegetation canopy. We need to see moors with a good hydrological function where mosses and rough vegetation slow down surface flow. Frequent burning damages this habitat.

The ash seen here is washed into our water supplies, leaving bare peat underneath which is rapidly washed away forming dissolved organic compounds (DOC) in our streams and rivers.

These dissolved organic compounds have to be removed by our water companies before the water is fit to drink. All this happens so that grouse can eat the young shoots of heather which eventually grows back onto the burnt sections.

Healthy moorland

The uplands above Sheffield have many steep slopes leading down into streams and rivers.

If we compare the lush green landscape with plentiful mosses to the charred, bare wasteland of recently burnt moors, which habitat will be most effective to retain water and slow down run off?

The Environment Agency, Natural England and Moors for the Future all agree that moorland restoration work like this shown above, will help reduce water flows as part of Natural Flood Management.

The picture shows a dam that has been constructed to retain water and encourage sphagnum moss to grow.

High cost

Near the picture on the previous page, burning has destroyed sphagnum and turned it white.

These examples can be found right next to each other on the same moor.

The five moorland owners in the Upper Don Catchment received £2.2 million in Government grants over a two-year period for moorland restoration work to create sphagnum bog.

Over the same two-year period these estates received High Level Stewardship payments of £950,000 specifically for environmentally beneficial management practices.

The five moorland owners over the same time burned large areas of these moors, damaging fragile vegetation including sphagnum and negating the benefits gained from moorland restoration.

Who's in charge?

The moors above Sheffield that form the Upper Don Catchment have an area of about 8,000 hectares or 80 square kilometres. Heather here is typically burnt on a ten year rotation, so each year around 800 hectares are burnt. It takes around 3 years before any cover of vegetation reappears on the burnt sections.

So we constantly have around 24 square kilometres of moorland above Sheffield with little or no vegetation. This managed burning has created a landscape devoid of vegetation equivalent to the huge wildfire at Saddleworth. Without doubt this increases flood risk because there is no vegetation to hold back and slow down water flow.

Who has responsibility to determine the best management for the wider environment? Natural England is the statutory body with powers to enforce changes in land management. But "Neither flood risk or water quality fall within the remit of Natural England". The Environment Agency is the statutory body that is partnering Sheffield City Council in the flood management scheme and the Environment Agency says "Our remit does not include land management practices". So the two key statutory bodies both deny any responsibility in managing the uplands for the benefit of Sheffield.

Local MP Angela Smith attended the Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee in parliament where she asked about Sheffield flood plans: "where is the Environment Agency on this? This is a complete failure to take a catchment-level approach and to take proper account of the importance of natural flood management".

Sheffield City Council is supporting work on moorland restoration and tree planting but "good" restoration work is continually negated by damaging practices including burning and a determination to perpetuate heather dominated moors. No wonder campaigners are calling for a ban on driven grouse shooting so that these damaging practices will stop.

Wildlife ...

The moors surrounding Sheffield are within the boundary of the Peak District National Park. Quite rightly people expect wildlife to do better within a national park but in 2017 not a single peregrine falcon nested on the grouse moors of the National Park.

However, in urban Sheffield people enjoyed the spectacular sight of nesting peregrines.

The plight of birds of prey has become a driving force behind the campaign to ban driven grouse shooting even after a slightly better year in 2018.

Raptor workers tell us: "Goshawk, red kites, peregrines, short-eared owls and ravens are all but non-existent across vast swathes of suitable habitat along the Pennine chain". The suitable habitat here consists mainly of managed grouse moors.

The osprey shown on the right was found near Glossop with injuries consistent with being killed in an illegal trap.

The grouse shooting industry cannot deny the lack of birds of prey in these uplands so they offer partnership working to restore wildlife to these moors. One such example is the Peak District Bird of Prey Initiative where many fine words are spoken.

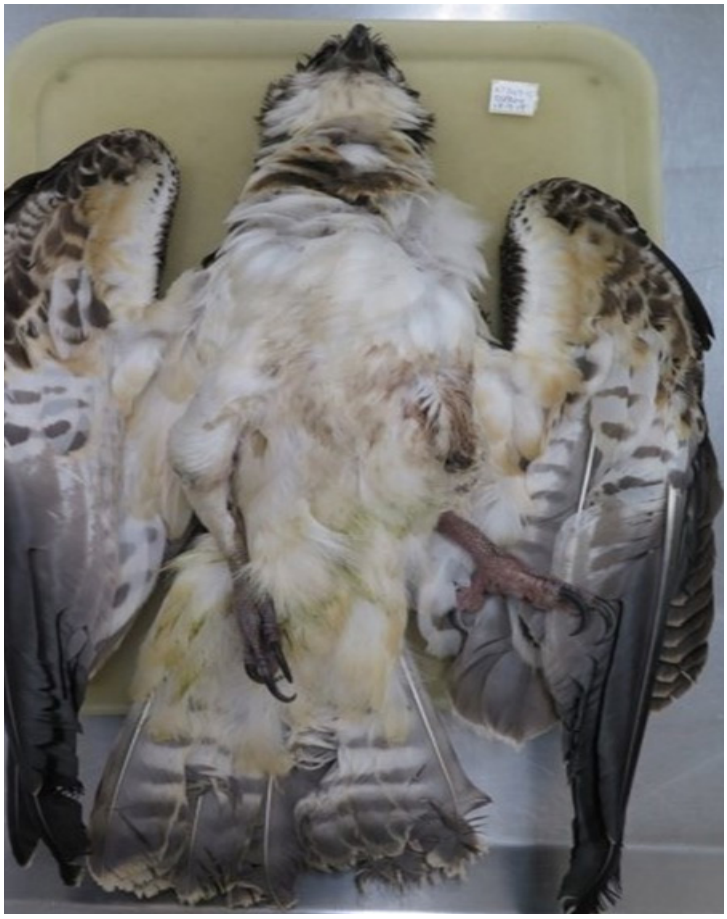
In seven years this initiative has consistently failed to reach even modest targets and the 2017 report says there has been "seven proven and suspected persecution incidents since 2015 and some areas have suffered a catastrophic failure of larger breeding raptors". Intense pressure on grouse moor owners has led to small improvements in 2018 but this is not grounds for complacency.

Driven grouse shooting is big business. Shooters expect to kill a lot of grouse in a day and the whole industry is geared up to producing those grouse numbers.

One of the estates in the Upper Don Catchment reported a "good" year in 2009 with 1,350 brace of grouse shot. A brace is two grouse so 2,700 birds were killed.

Since then estates expect to shoot greater numbers of grouse every year. A pair of grouse can produce up to 10 chicks and the estates aim to kill as many grouse as possible but leave enough to breed for another record-breaking season the following year. Around £150 is charged per brace.

One peregrine on a grouse moor will kill one or two grouse every day, including through the winter. The arithmetic is clear – a single peregrine would wipe out most of the profits for a year. This is why birds of prey are killed.



... or factory farms?

With all the predators killed, grouse moors resemble outdoor battery farms with an average density of 370 grouse per square km in 2014.

Not surprisingly disease can be rife in these conditions. With the intensification of grouse moor management from 2000 onwards estates suffered severe outbreaks of strongylosis, which is lethal to grouse and caused by a parasitic worm.

The solution was medicated grit trays. Grouse take the grit to help them digest the heather that's eaten. The grit contains a high-dose of Flubendazole, an anti-parasitic wormer.

There has been no regulation and nobody knows the effects of having high doses of such a drug in the food chain and the environment. For the people who eat grouse, all meat must be clear of veterinary medicines but there is only the most derisory government testing for Flubendazole.

Estates switch to un-medicated grit in the weeks leading up to a shoot but there is no clear information on how long these drugs remain in grouse and remain in the environment.

Lead shot is used to kill the grouse and tests have shown up to 100 times the level permitted in other meat in birds being consumed by the public.

The remains of mountain hares in a “stink pit”, used to attract and trap other animals

Mountain hares

The Peak District is the only area in the north of England where mountain hare can be found. These hares grow a white coat in winter and are only found in remote areas. They have become one of the iconic species of the National Park.

In Scotland mountain hare are killed by the truck load because grouse moor owners think the hares might spread disease which affects grouse. (Louping Ill).

There is considerable evidence that mountain hare are also deliberately killed in the Peak District, by shooting and snaring. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan lists mountain hare as a “species of conservation concern” but this hasn’t stopped them from being killed. We need the mountain hare of the Peak District to be protected by law.

A local conservation body has been surveying mountain hare for 44 years. In 2017 they wrote “the big shock was only 2 hares east of grid line 21. In past years we have seen dozens here. Our observations correlate with accounts of systematic shooting last winter”.

The Hunt Investigation Team conducted an investigation into one of the estates here. They found this mountain hare in agony, trapped in a snare. The hare died shortly afterwards and a post mortem revealed the cause of death as severe internal bleeding and shock. (pictured right)

Snares

Snares are wire loops fastened to a stake in the ground.

They are used primarily to catch foxes but Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affair's own research shows 73% non-target species are captured, such as the mountain hare above.

Animals are attracted to a snared area by bait placed in a stink pit like the one left.

Hunt Investigation Team footage shows the reality of gamekeeping and the use of these traps.

Foxes, badgers and mountain hares struggle to get free with the wire loops closing ever-tighter, causing external and internal injuries. A keeper shooting one free is shown on the next page.

An estimated 400 traps were found on one estate alone.

Traps

In almost every gully and watercourse spring traps are set to catch stoats and weasels (see above).

International convention will soon ban these traps but instead of taking the opportunity to stop this slaughter, the government will sanction similar and virtually identical traps instead.

Recommendations

◊ The Environment Agency, Natural England and Sheffield City Council to ensure natural flood management measures are put in place across all the moorland surrounding Sheffield as a matter of urgency, funded by existing money earmarked for moorland management and moorland restoration.

◊ A complete ban on heather burning in this area.

◊ Public grants to be paid to moorland landowners in relation to their ability to provide public goods, namely clean air, water that is free from peat and other organic compounds, an environment that is free from indiscriminate medication and an environment where flood risk and wildfire risk is minimised.

◊ A ban on all traps which cause animals or birds to suffer.

◊ Statutory protection for mountain hare.

◊ Ban on driven grouse shooting. Proposals for licencing and vicarious liability would be progress, but the industry has shown itself to be incompatible with management of the moors for public good.

Further action

The Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust has a petition calling for the banning of stink pits
https://www.wildsheffield.com/campaign/our-moors/

Further reading

https://huntinvestigationteam.org/

https://raptorpersecutionscotland.wordpress.com

https://markavery.info/blog