

SAVING OUR MAGNIFICENT MEADOWS IN WALES – grassland funding possibilities

Summary

Despite a great deal of effort, species rich grasslands across the UK are still declining in quality and extent. The Saving our Magnificent Meadows Project, an initiative of the Lowland Grassland HAP group, is seeking additional funding and resources for grassland conservation across the UK. Several avenues are being explored including a proposal to use LIFE+ funding to complement existing mechanisms and make grassland conservation more effective and sustainable. A crucial part of this is to develop a wider understanding of the importance of species-rich grasslands using an ecosystems services approach.

Saving our Magnificent Meadows project

- The Saving Our Magnificent Meadows project is supported and steered by the UK country conservation agencies (CCW, NE, SNH, NIEA). The Steering Group of the Project consists of representatives of all the statutory agencies, Plantlife International, The Grassland Trust, the Grazing Animals Partnership (GAP) and its Welsh equivalent (PONT).
- The purpose of the project is:
To help secure, in every part of the UK, well-resourced and sufficiently-funded projects contributing to national BAP targets for species-rich grasslands and their associated species, working in an environment of greater understanding and awareness about the value and importance of these grasslands.
- The project has details of and contacts with over 160 grassland projects across the UK.
- The Saving our Magnificent Meadows project aims to increase funding and resources for those working on species-rich grassland and is approaching potential funders to try to secure long-term funding.
- In addition, the project is considering facilitating applications and may itself submit applications with and on behalf of others. LIFE+ was one particular funding source that was seriously considered in 2009.

Wildlife-rich grasslands are important and valuable because:

- They form a major component of rural and urban landscapes, particularly in areas of high landscape value such as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, as well as in places where there is reduced wildlife such as parks in an urban setting. They help to identify a 'sense of place' and community, and form part of our cultural heritage, inspiring poets, authors, composers and artists.
- Grasslands in general provide and contribute to valuable services and benefits such as soil production and soil health, oxygen cycles and carbon sequestration, purifying water and ameliorating the impact of flooding, and the production of meat, milk, wool and so on. They also provide access and recreation opportunities, physical and mental health benefits from green exercise, and protection of historic sites.
- Wildlife-rich grasslands offer additional benefits. Research has shown that the quality of meat derived from such grassland can contribute to good health (in terms of increased proportions of beneficial polyunsaturated fatty acids, etc), improved flavour (related to the concept of '*terroir*' or regional foods) and improved shelf life (Wood 2007). In addition, the psychological benefits of green-space have been shown to increase with biodiversity (Fuller 2007). Flower-rich grasslands providing nectar and honey through the year (in roadside verges, field corners, parks, gardens, allotment edges and nature reserves) are thought to be crucial to the long-term survival of bees (fundamental to the production of food).

Wildlife-rich grasslands are declining in extent and quality:

- Evidence from Biodiversity Action Plan reporting, statutory site condition monitoring and sample surveys indicate that many priority grasslands in the UK are in unfavourable condition, and that these wildlife-rich grasslands are declining in both quality and extent. A 97% loss of

lowland unimproved grassland in the UK occurred between 1930 and the late 1980s (Fuller 1987) and these losses have been reflected in Europe: Partel (2005) reported that semi-natural grasslands have undergone a dramatic decline in extent over the last 50 years in Britain and Europe.

- Declines have also been observed in grasslands species. For example, in the UK, specialist grassland butterflies are declining significantly on agriculturally managed grassland sites (including reserves and protected areas), both in recent years (since 2000) and in the longer-term (Defra 2008). Furthermore, the European Grassland Butterfly Indicator (2008) shows that since 1990 European butterfly populations have declined by almost 60%
- Such declines mean that it will be difficult to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010 (UN Convention on Biodiversity 2001, and The European Commission 2006 Biodiversity Communication 2006)
- Despite a range of mechanisms in place to deliver the grassland Habitat Action Plan and Species Action Plan targets, there are some crucial gaps in the current provision for grassland conservation. Innovative approaches are needed to bridge these gaps if the targets are to be fully met and this will require additional funding that cannot be provided from existing sources.

Reasons for decline that have yet to be fully addressed:

Consultation with over 200 individuals and groups across the UK has indicated that 12 broad themes of issues impact adversely on grassland conservation. The two most common single issues are:

- 1) Lack of appropriate graziers and appropriate grazing animals located near to sites and available for limited periods
- 2) Insufficient data and knowledge about the importance and management of wildlife-rich grasslands by those within and outside the nature conservation sector

Additional mechanisms needed to ensure grassland conservation targets are met include:

- Evidence and data to convince land managers and the wider public of the ecosystem services and benefits derived from species-rich grasslands. (NB Ecosystem services are defined as the wide range of goods and services provided by the natural environment that underpin human health, well-being and prosperity [Defra 2007])
- Awareness-raised and increased knowledge of both the benefits and issues impacting on wildlife-rich grassland both within and outside the sector (including local authorities, NGOs and statutory agencies, farmers and landowner/managers, the wider community including schools and commercial interests such as food suppliers and outlets) using web-based information, local and regional events, and promotion of grasslands across the community
- An efficient and effective grazing animal project and machinery ring managing species-rich grasslands across the region, connecting landowner/managers with graziers and hay-making/seed-harvesting contractors and/or those with appropriate machinery
- A means of reintegrating the management of species rich grassland into agricultural systems in order to achieve long-term sustainability, for example, through local branding of produce using local markets and commitment to agri-environment support schemes.
- Efficient and effective data gathering and monitoring of wildlife-rich grasslands
- The sharing of good practice and lessons learned both within and outside the region
- A coordinated network of sufficiently-resourced projects implementing the grassland HAP targets

Funding necessary to implement these additional mechanisms:

- There are a number of possible courses of action that could address some of the above.
- These could include approaching UK funding sources such as HLF, landfill grants (such as SITA, WREN, Grantscape) and trusts such as Esmee Fairbairn. Each of these have specific requirements such as public involvement and targeting BAP priority habitats and/or species.
- European funding could also be considered, such as LIFE+

LIFE+ Biodiversity funding programme

- LIFE+ offers huge funding potential and could bring in resources to all parts of the UK. LIFE+ grants cover up to 50% of total project costs. The indicative minimum budget for 2009 for the nature and biodiversity strand is 112,500,000 Euros (with the UK to receive a possible 17,895,000 Euros) where the indicative number of projects is between 90 and 150
- LIFE+ (as with all environmental funders) has eligibility criteria and conditions. The key determinants for LIFE+ Biodiversity funding are that potential projects must be innovative or demonstration projects that contribute to the implementation of the objectives of Commission Communication (COM (2006) 216 final) "Halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010 – and beyond.
- There appears to be a good match between the criteria for LIFE+, and the innovative approach that is needed to improve the effectiveness of grassland conservation. It should be possible to frame what needs to be done, using projects that are already underway or in preparation, in a way that is both acceptable and eye-catching to LIFE+.
- We are proposing that the LIFE+ Biodiversity criteria for innovation and demonstration could be met by:
 1. Using the ecosystem services approach (Defra 2007), to:
 - Identify the key services or benefits that wildlife-rich grasslands provide and raise awareness and understanding of these in target parts of the local and wider community (see below for examples)
 - Demonstrate increased awareness by specific measures (see below for examples)
 - Provide useful data about the benefits of and services provided by bio-diverse grasslands
 2. Using as wide a range of partners from a variety of sectors all working together for a common purpose (ie contribution to the grassland BAP targets)
- Our objectives would be the:
 1. Delivery of the UK (including Wales) BAP targets for grasslands and associated grassland species
 2. Sustainable management of species-rich grassland
 3. Improved co-operation between all organisations and individuals involved with the management and conservation of species-rich grasslands
 4. Greater awareness of the services and benefits that wildlife-rich grasslands provide, more understanding of the issues they face, and more involvement by the wider community in their local and regional grasslands

Examples of how grassland projects could meet and demonstrate ecosystem services and benefits:

- Key benefits and services provided by *species-rich grasslands* are listed below, together with suggested ways to implement and measure these benefits:
 1. Provisioning service – products obtained such as milk and dairy products, meat, wool, hay marketed as healthy conservation-grade. This could be met by better management of grassland sites using a Grazing Animal Project (PONT)/machinery ring, with a branding and marketing scheme (measured by increase in farmers using or being involved in a GAP, increase in sales and jobs, and by site condition monitoring)
 2. Regulating services – pollination services. This could be met by identifying, managing and monitoring a network of flower-rich grasslands (field and woodland edges, road-side verges, churchyards, village greens, parks, nature reserves, Local Sites and SSSIs etc) providing nectar through the year (measured by increase in extent and quality of flower-rich grassland, and could help to meet LA197 targets)
 3. Cultural services – the aesthetic and spiritual resonance provided by these special grasslands. This service would be met by awareness-raising and access to grassland by all parts of the community and particularly school children and community groups, and by linking to tourism schemes, and better protection of the historic environment eg Scheduled Monuments (measured by increase in school visits, cultural events, hits on a website, B&Bs with links to grassland sites, walks & events, protection of SMs)

4. Physical and mental health benefits from visiting wildlife-rich grasslands, volunteering in site management, survey, walking and exercise. This could be met linking farms and schools, a system of (guided) health walks and visits, a volunteer scheme for practical site management such as scrub clearance, fencing, stock lookers, surveying and monitoring (measured by increasing use of health walks, numbers of volunteers, school farm visits)
- We hope the above ideas cover what most grassland conservation projects would like to do, but we would welcome other ideas and suggestions.
 - All the above could include a wide-range of partners some of which may not usually be directly associated with conservation projects.
 - Potential partners could include:
 1. Farmers and landowners (NFU, CLA)
 2. Countryside contractors & small businesses (RDA)
 3. Conservation partners (Plantlife, CCW, Wildlife Trusts, Butterfly Conservation, RSPB, National Trust, Small Woods Association etc)
 4. Statutory agencies & other public bodies (Environment Agency, CADW, Highways Agency)
 5. Local Authorities (planning, highways, parks etc)
 6. Health practitioners (NHS, Primary Care Trusts)
 7. Community Groups (WI, Scouts/Guides, Parish Councils etc)
 8. Schools and Universities
 9. Tourism (Tourist Boards, B&Bs/hotels etc,)
 10. Arts Centres, galleries, music societies
 11. Retail (food outlets, farmers markets)
 12. Churchyard and cemetery owners/managers

LIFE+ Information & Communication

- LIFE+ Information & Communication is aimed at awareness raising campaigns and communication actions on environmental issues, in particular halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010. The EC encourages submissions of proposals that contribute to the EU Biodiversity Action Plan which “addresses the challenge of integrating biodiversity concerns into other policy sectors in a unified way”
- If successful, up to 50% funding is offered.
- A project that raises awareness about ecosystem services provided by species-rich grasslands would help meet one of the two key findings of our research into issues that impact on grassland conservation, ie lack of awareness both within and outside the sector. In addition, the groundwork done for raising awareness and bringing potential partners together would help facilitate the preparation of future grassland projects and funding bids (not necessarily to European funding). We are aware of a possible partner project in Eire.
- The Saving our Magnificent Meadows project could submit a proposal to LIFE+ Information & Communication funding, as follows:
 - Title could be - Identifying and promoting the ecosystem services of species-rich grassland
 - The main objective could be to raise awareness of the values, benefits and services provided by wildlife-rich grassland to local and wider communities and thereby increasing support for grassland conservation across a wide range of organisations and individuals
 - Actions could include:
 - Identifying key ecosystem services and supporting evidence (literature search)
 - Preparation of website for presentation of evidence and provide links to current projects where ecosystem services (in whatever form they appear) are promoted (ie sharing of good practice)
 - Preparation of literature and other promotional material
 - Appointment of a team of Grassland Ambassadors who would:

- Raise awareness of the value and benefits of well-managed species-rich grassland with a wide range of organisations and individuals eg farmers & commercial outlets for products, health authorities, local authority staff involved with estate management, highways and planning, those involved in the tourism industry, education authorities, volunteer sector including youth groups, WI, recreational bodies, etc
- Build partnerships between sectoral interests
- Facilitate grassland project development based upon the principle of demonstration and delivery of ecosystem services
- Use a variety of mechanisms and media such as events, talks, meetings to bring people together and to create a better understanding of the importance of species-rich grassland
- This proposal depends on financial support provide by the statutory agencies, perhaps in the form of seconded staff, or hosting posts, with financial support from the EU for material, publication, events and for some of the posts' costs. A rough estimate would indicate that such a project would fall within the bounds of EU funding
- The Ambassadors could be part-time or full-time, employed for 2 or 3 years, and work in large areas supported by one or more statutory agencies. A possible structure could be an 5 or 6 Ambassadors with one based in each of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, with two or three working across England (perhaps one in the north, one in the Midlands & East Anglia, one in London and the south).
- A tool-kit and final reports of the relative methods of promotion of ecosystem services and uptake of ideas would be prepared as a final report. This could have wider applicability across both the UK and also Europe
- A proposal could be prepared based on the current findings and research of the Saving our Magnificent meadows project, but would depend on financial support of the statutory agencies.

LIFE+ bid could reinforce and complement existing grassland projects and initiatives in Wales and beyond

- Meetings with a number of grassland projects and partners together with email discussions have identified a number of potential grassland projects, particularly grazing animals projects, species projects, branding and marketing schemes and awareness-raising events across Wales. Most of these projects have elements that could be included within an ecosystem services framework.
- In addition, there may be other contacts who would be interested in working on grassland or grassland-related projects. These could include farmers and land owners, food businesses, local authority staff as well as the statutory agencies and NGOs.
- Similar groups of grassland projects in other parts of the country have considered a LIFE+ bid (framed within an ecosystem services context) during 2009 and may wish to work with grassland partners from a number of regions/countries within the UK to prepare and submit a bid by mid-September 2010.

Next steps

- It would be useful to explore these issues and ideas with grassland partners within Wales to see if any collaborative venture is a possibility
- Potential partners may be able to bring different resources to a proposal and it would be useful to discuss these possibilities together with ideas about approaches to potential European and/or national funders.

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