



Bringing Dartmoor Back to Life

A Call to Action

Introduction

Nature on Dartmoor is at a turning point. Wildlife and habitats have faced many challenges, but the moor still holds extraordinary potential.

Imagine Dartmoor alive with birdsong, colourful meadows, thriving peatlands, and healthy rivers. Dartmoor could be one of the most outstanding places for wildlife in Europe - a vibrant, working landscape full of sound and life.

This vision is entirely achievable. There is already good work being done for nature on Dartmoor: we applaud the organisations and individuals who are restoring bogs, woodlands, meadows, and key species such as pine marten and curlew.

However, recent data shows that large areas of Dartmoor still remain in a poor state for nature, despite legal protections and public funding. Key changes to policy and practice are urgently needed for nature recovery to truly happen at the scale required.

This is our call to action. Together, let's make it happen and **bring Dartmoor back to life**. The time to act is now.

During 2025, Dartmoor Nature Alliance (DNA), with support from the Devon Environment Foundation, brought together people from across the moor who share a passion for nature recovery — farmers, commoners, ecologists, specialists, and volunteers. We asked a simple but vital question: what can we do now to restore Dartmoor's nature at scale?

This document draws on the insight, experience, and optimism of those conversations.

Understanding Dartmoor's Challenges

Dartmoor's 368 square miles include a rich mix of farmland, moorland, woodland, and river systems. Centuries of industry, changes in land use and intensification of farming have damaged nature in many places.

Dartmoor's precious peatlands are dried and degrading¹; heather and bilberry have almost disappeared from the heaths, overgrazed and burned². Broadleaved woodlands, including rare temperate rainforests, are few³. Meadows in lower areas have given way to silage fields, maize and high nutrient inputs⁴. Many of Dartmoor's rivers are failing ecologically⁵, and key species such as lapwing are disappearing.

However, across Dartmoor, those with a passion for nature are coming together, driven by a positive vision. In some places, we are beginning to see nature being restored. Blanket bogs with their precious peat are being "rewetted" and slowly coming back to life⁶. Woodlands such as Wistman's Wood⁷ are, at last, being encouraged to regenerate and spread. Flower-rich meadows and new woodland are being restored and re-created⁸. Species such as pine marten⁹ and curlew¹⁰ are being put back in the landscape.

Despite this excellent work, the majority of Dartmoor is still not in a good state for nature, and our most protected wildlife sites remain in poor condition. 26,277 hectares of Dartmoor are meant to be protected and managed for nature, by law - that's 28% of the National Park as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and, in some cases, Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)¹¹. However, only 16% of these sites are currently in favourable condition¹². Recent Government data shows that a number are still declining, and a shocking 0.1% of the three major SSSI commons are in good condition¹³.

Urgent action is clearly needed at a larger scale, building on the good work that is already being done, to ensure that nature is restored across Dartmoor National Park as an integral part of our working landscape. However, this urgency is not shared by some who hold the power to make positive change on Dartmoor. Instead, nature is often considered as an afterthought, losing out through political compromise, and held back by the loud voices of a few vested interests. Difficult issues are avoided, regulators and government bodies are bullied into submission, and Dartmoor's nature continues to decline.

¹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10980-019-00844-5>

² Natural England Whole Feature Assessments here <https://www.dartmoornature.org.uk/library> and for one specific common https://www.dartmoornature.org.uk/files/ugd/cc63f2_a3698cceed7848bd891ef900dbeb02ab.pdf

³ Section 2.3.4 here https://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/94371/Natural-Environment-Evidence-Review-2019.03.22_FINAL.pdf

⁴ <https://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/wildlife-and-heritage/habitats2/farmland/haymeadows>

⁵ p21 https://www.cnp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/RiverAtRisk_Report_2025_FINAL.pdf

⁶ <https://southwestpeatlandpartnership.co.uk/>

⁷ <https://duchyofcornwall.org/article/first-wistmans-wood-trees-planted-as-part-of-efforts-to-double-size-of-ancient-temperate-rainforest/>

⁸ <https://moormeadows.org.uk/>

⁹ <https://www.devonwildlifetrust.org/bringing-back-pine-martens>

¹⁰ <https://duchyofcornwall.org/article/the-duchy-of-cornwall-plays-critical-role-in-recovering-dartmoors-curlew/>

¹¹ p4 https://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/94371/Natural-Environment-Evidence-Review-2019.03.22_FINAL.pdf

¹² Ibid p4

¹³ <https://www.dartmoornature.org.uk/post/sssicondition>

A Shared Opportunity

The work ahead is about partnership and ambition - communities, farmers, conservationists, and policymakers coming together around a shared purpose: to make Dartmoor an exemplar of nature recovery.

We know this is often difficult. People united by a common passion for Dartmoor often find themselves at odds on the details, with differing views of the future, and different opinions about how far and how fast things need to change. But for nature's sake we need to work together as a Dartmoor community.

We believe that by aligning vision, investment, and care, with good leadership and governance, Dartmoor can once again become one of Europe's most outstanding landscapes for wildlife — a thriving, life-filled place that supports nature, people, and culture alike.

Dartmoor deserves the very best of our collective imagination, commitment, and love. Together, we can ensure its future is as inspiring as its past.

This is our call to action for ***Bringing Dartmoor Back to Life***.

Dartmoor's nature restored

DNA's vision for Dartmoor is a place where nature is in the ascendancy: trees, shrubs and wildflowers return to bleak moorland, valleys fill with woodland dripping in lichens and moss, heathlands turn purple with heather and echo with the sound of bird calls, and rivers flow clean and full of life from source to sea. A place where **the needs of the natural environment come first and take priority in the way the land is managed**, not as an afterthought or as part of a mean compromise or something to be ignored.

Dartmoor should be valued first and foremost for the quality of its natural heritage and its life-enhancing qualities for all, not merely as a resource to be exploited or an amenity to be utilised by a few people.

Dartmoor could be a haven where people can be inspired by nature and all it has to offer; where the public can experience what it means to immerse themselves in a working landscape where wildlife is returning, spreading, and thriving.

If our vision is to become reality, Dartmoor needs to heal. This nature restoration process will need to embrace every part of the park, from the high tors to the enclosed farmland, and the rivers and streams that connect them. We want to see a living Dartmoor, a *Natural* Park as well as a National Park.

Why restore Dartmoor's nature?

- **Benefits for nature:** Diverse natural habitats – from bog, heath and woodland, to river and hay meadow – can all support thriving populations of vulnerable and threatened species such as Marsh and High Brown Fritillary butterflies, Southern Damselfly, Greater Horseshoe Bats, Atlantic salmon, sea trout, European eel, Whinchat, Tree Pipit and Cuckoo. Nature restoration secures these places and their wildlife, helping to deliver global targets of restoring 30% of land for nature by 2030.
- **Benefits for the climate:** Functioning wet peatlands, healthy soils, and broadleaved trees lock away carbon and prevent carbon loss, making Dartmoor a significant natural ally in our fight to manage climate change.
- **Benefits for water:** Restored wetlands hold back rainfall, clean our river water, reduce flooding downstream, and sustain cool river flows in summer droughts. They provide safe places to swim and clean water to drink.
- **Benefits for people:** A healthier natural Dartmoor means stronger rural economies, more green jobs, thriving and resilient farming communities, and wilder places for adventure, peace, and connection with nature.

How do we get there? Actions needed to 2030¹⁴ and beyond

1. Recovering Natural Processes

- **Rewet Dartmoor's precious peatlands**, tripling annual investment in the work of the South West Peatland Partnership by 2030. This will also reduce the dominance of *Molinia* (purple moor grass) on the degraded peat. All blanket bog SSSIs should be on a trajectory to recovery by 2030, with all Dartmoor peatlands and their hydrology restored by 2042¹⁵.
- **Restore all dwarf shrub heath (heather and bilberry)** through reducing sheep grazing, removing all sheep and cattle grazing in winter, and letting the land rest. All heathland SSSIs should be in recovery by 2030.
- **Double natural broadleaved woodland and temperate rainforest cover along river valleys by 2042**, with plans agreed and underway by 2030. Natural regeneration can be augmented where needed by careful planting. Scrubland should be encouraged to expand naturally around woodland edges, creating vital transition habitats.

¹⁴ As part of global commitments to restore 30% of land for nature by 2030 <https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets>

¹⁵ 2042 is used as this is the end date of the UK's 25 year environment plan and thus links to numerous national targets

- **All designated features (SSSIs and SACs) should be recovering by 2030 and all restored to favourable condition by 2042.** Legally protected wildlife sites - Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Special Area of Conservation (SACs) - should be at the heart of nature's recovery, respected as the wellspring from which nature can return, as part of fully functioning ecosystems and natural processes. Landowners and commoners are already required by law to restore and maintain the nature of these sites.
- **All swaling (burning) should be banned on peat of any depth.** The use of fire as a management tool elsewhere should only be employed when its ecological benefits are clear. Rewetting of peat (see above) will reduce wildfire risk.
- **The condition of all Dartmoor rivers must improve by 2030.** Pollution must be reduced from sewage outfalls and farms, ensuring that legal requirements are met for good ecological and chemical status. The restoration of river systems from their source towards the sea, including full geomorphological restoration, should be underway for at least two Dartmoor rivers by 2030 and ten rivers by 2035.
- **Support efforts to restore species on the brink,** such as curlew, lapwing and salmon, and to reintroduce lost species, such as beaver, wildcat, white-tailed eagle and freshwater pearl mussel.
- **By 2042, all of Dartmoor's farmland should be managed to a new "Dartmoor Nature Standard" of common good practice** following agroecological principles, reducing inputs and grazing levels, banning the use of chemical pesticides and herbicides, restoring soils, restoring hydrology through reversing drainage, managing hedges well for diversity, ensuring land is not left bare or poached by livestock over winter, and working with natural processes. All farms should be on track to achieving this by 2030.
- **Review damage caused by invasive non native species** such as Himalayan balsam, pheasant, *Rhododendron ponticum*, grey squirrel and fallow deer. Where necessary and effective, put measures in place to effectively control problem species and prevent further introductions.
- **Review priority archaeological sites on Dartmoor,** so where conflicts exist between nature restoration potential and archaeological protection, a balance can be struck whilst ensuring that the most important sites are protected and accessible for future generations.

These actions require a change of mindset in many areas, actively changing current land management practices and moving towards a working landscape that respects, and works with, nature and natural processes.

Making these actions happen on the ground will require a redirection of existing public grants towards rewarding positive change and genuinely regenerative farming; collaboration with land managers and farmers; provision of well-resourced 1:1 advice; support from local communities; and policies that place ecological recovery at the heart of land use.

Restoration also demands a new and bold approach to the way Dartmoor is grazed, moving away from intensive farming practices that have dominated over recent decades. Some parts of the commons will benefit from rest periods with no grazing animals for several years, while others may need low-level grazing primarily with cattle and ponies, a reduction of sheep numbers and no sheep grazing in winter. These conditions mimic a more traditional approach to grazing management of our marginal and fragile uplands, that focuses on condition of land rather than number of grazing animals.

2. A Green Economy

- ***Long-term funding is secured from Government (the public) for carbon storage through peatland restoration and woodland recovery, clean water and flood prevention through wetland and river restoration, and species conservation.*** Much of this is delivered through well co-ordinated Government projects supporting and rewarding landowners and farmers for effective land restoration and management that sequesters carbon, restores habitats, and protects wildlife. The Dartmoor farming community will be proud of their role in restoring the nature of the National Park, and this work will be celebrated by local communities.
- ***Sustainable tourism funding mechanisms (such as visitor levies) are reinvested in nature recovery.*** For example, a small visitor levy or “nature contribution” on accommodation or parking could provide steady funding for conservation and community projects. In this way, visitors can support and invest in the landscape they enjoy.
- ***Green jobs in nature restoration and sustainable tourism are promoted and thriving.*** Many more people are working in nature-based businesses on Dartmoor. Community land ownership, community-supported agriculture and nature-positive enterprises are delivering for nature.

These actions require us to consider existing and new ways of funding nature restoration on Dartmoor, blending government financial support, charitable grants, and private investment from businesses wanting to offset carbon or enhance biodiversity into a *coordinated programme of funding for nature*. To promote a nature-based economy, public funding and private investment should appropriately reward land management practices that lock up carbon, restore habitats, and safeguard wildlife, ensuring that nature-rich practices are economically viable.

Farmers must be provided with financial incentives, training and strong local markets for healthy, sustainably produced food, backed up by a legal framework to provide a baseline for standards. Payment for restoration must be based on results. Where existing agreements are not producing positive change for nature, they should be revoked.

Community buyouts of land, and funding co-operatives for agroecological farming, woodland products, and eco-tourism should be enabled, each helping build nature-positive local enterprises.

At the same time, investment in skills and infrastructure is needed to expand green jobs, from peatland restoration and nature restoration work to sustainable tourism that celebrates Dartmoor's natural heritage. By combining these efforts and promoting Dartmoor as a model landscape where livelihoods and nature coexist in harmony, we can position the area as an international exemplar of a genuinely sustainable, nature-based economy.

3. A Nature-Rich Dartmoor Community

- **All local authorities, town councils and parish councils on and around Dartmoor should agree a common 'Dartmoor standard' of being nature-positive** - ie. pledging a net gain for nature in all management of public space. This will result in abundant green space, more trees, wildlife corridors, pollinator-rich public land, and pesticide-free zones.
- **Nature should be deeply embedded in the planning and building process**, embedding nature and sustainability into every stage of development, requiring features such as renewable energy, clean water and minimising abstraction impact, swift bricks, bat boxes, green roofs, permeable surfaces and green spaces as standard.
- **Creation of a significant new volunteer task force for Dartmoor, drawing on communities from around the moor to help with the nature restoration effort.** Volunteering and citizen-led schemes could involve residents and visitors directly in practical work, with funding provided in kind by those who can offer their time, along with the reciprocal health and social benefits this might bring.
- **Access to high-quality green space should be available for all residents in and around Dartmoor.** Local authorities, community groups, and schools can work together to ensure that everyone has regular access to wild places. We need to reimagine access on Dartmoor, opening up more land for responsible access while investing in outdoor learning and building knowledge and care for nature and the land.
- **A significant new 'responsible Dartmoor' campaign should be enacted**, following the Countryside Code to encourage and enforce dogs on leads, no open fires, minimal disturbance in sensitive areas and responsible backpack camping, targeting local people and visitors alike. This campaign needs to include clear explanations of how certain activities harm Dartmoor's nature.
- **A range of arts, heritage and community projects are supported to strengthen the community's cultural and spiritual connections to Dartmoor's landscapes**, ensuring that people feel a deep sense of belonging and shared responsibility for its future

Many people come to Dartmoor to experience its open spaces. The recent Right to Roam debate and wild camping campaign showed how many folk have a deep love of the moor and support its sustainable use; and yet a small number of people continue to misuse and abuse the moor with fires, inappropriate camping, and disturbance with dogs and motor vehicles.

We believe that responsible use of Dartmoor includes an understanding of its nature, land management and the requirements of wildlife restoration. Significant improvements can be made to the amount of public information available and current schemes to promote responsible countryside access. Dartmoor National Park, the Dartmoor Preservation Association and other bodies have an important role to play here, but Government must enhance statutory responsibilities and resources so this essential work can be truly effective and long lasting.

4. **Bold Leadership and System Change to Deliver for Nature**

- ***Dartmoor Commons legislation should be reviewed and reformed by 2030*** so that nature, community and transparency are at the heart of Commons Council decision-making. Reforming commons legislation will provide the legal basis for positive change in practice on the ground, and remove conflict with (or ambivalence to) nature legislation.
- ***Public bodies such as Natural England and Environment Agency should be adequately funded and supported to do their jobs well***, to ensure that Dartmoor's legally protected sites are restored and managed properly. This includes changing or ending agreements with landowners where agreed conditions are not met, and enforcing environmental law where damage or neglect occurs. More substantial penalties and swift action against ecological damage would serve as a deterrent for such activities.
- ***Land management practices that cause significant damage to nature should be banned***. These include the release of pheasants, burning on peatland of any depth, and the culling of badgers. Scientific evidence should drive any decision-making, and enforcement of laws and regulations must be actively pursued.
- ***All local authorities, including Dartmoor National Park, should have strengthened legal duties to restore, prioritise and protect nature***, ensuring that every policy and plan is assessed for its ecological impacts and potential benefits.
- ***Local communities and environmental organisations should be appropriately engaged in transparent, evidence-based governance on Dartmoor to benefit nature***. Participatory governance structures—such as citizen assemblies, advisory boards, or open data platforms—could make decision-making more transparent and accountable. Current environmental laws and bye-laws should be well promoted to raise awareness among the public.

- **Long-term ecological monitoring of Dartmoor's priority nature sites should be supported** through partnerships with local universities, schools and citizen scientists, ensuring that management adapts over time and is rooted in science and evidence.

Call to Action

A voice for Dartmoor's nature - the courage for real change

For nature's sake, and for all of us, Dartmoor must be a place of cooperation, where communities listen to one another, learn from each other, and find the courage to face common challenges.

It must be a place where people witness bold nature restoration initiatives being implemented; a land where people look to the future, and where powerful and highly vocal minorities can't hold back the common desire for nature's recovery.

Dartmoor has the potential to be one of the most outstanding places for wildlife in Europe. A place where we all thrive.

The time to act is now. Together, let's make it happen and **bring Dartmoor back to life.**

A summary of this document is available in print form.

Bringing Dartmoor Back to Life is a project funded by Devon Environment Foundation.

In 2025 Dartmoor Nature Alliance held workshops and conducted numerous interviews with people with a passion for Dartmoor's nature and its restoration. This document is informed by the workshops and interviews conducted. We'd like to thank everyone who took part for their wisdom and expertise.