

PRESS RELEASE : Spring Conference 2014
Discovering Exmoor : People & Place

“We believe that the lessons of Exmoor apply to all” wrote S. H. Burton in 1966.

At a special Conference organised recently by the Exmoor Society, in partnership with Exeter University and the Exmoor National Park Authority, Rachel Thomas, Chairman of the Society in setting the scene, told the story of how Exmoor’s designation as a national park 60 years ago was fiercely fought. National parks in England and Wales were different from international ones in that there were no pristine landscapes that could be set aside and owned by the State. The concept applied in this country in 1949 was confined to beautiful and relatively wild country with extensive tracts of open land with high value for outdoor recreation and where hill farming had been practised for centuries. Exmoor was named because of its “spectacular coastline, fine heather bracken and grass moorland, beautiful wooded valleys and upland farmland and antiquities in great propinquity”. She argued that in our crowded islands we needed to protect spectacular landscapes that held evidence of our past, provided space for nature and natural resource use, and gave pleasure to so many people. She stated that the national park concept has passed the test of time and has shown that it is adaptable to new challenges and priorities and has demonstrated that by encompassing land based rural development, landscape protection can be stronger and public benefits enhanced. She concluded by saying: “Exmoor is unique, still relatively wild and tranquil, the brand is strong, the people resilient. Let us have the passion and commitment to retain its special qualities for the nation”.

Academics from Exeter University explained to the Conference how their importance research work on Exmoor was of relevance nationally and internationally. Climate change is said to be one of the most significant long-term threats facing the natural environment, and Professor Richard Brazier, Associate Professor of Geography outlined his research on the Exmoor Mires Project. He showed that by blocking up drainage ditches on the peat areas of Exmoor’s moorland, it is likely that water could be stored for longer in the peat soils and be released more slowly as base flow in the summer months, and possibly help reduce downstream flooding. Carbon could also be retained and sequestered in the mires. How communities can come together and respond to flooding was demonstrated by Dr Stewart Barr, also an Associate Professor of Geography who through his workshop in Dulverton in November last year, showed how local solutions could be found. Dr Keith Howe, Senior Research Fellow of the Centre for Rural Policy Research, summarised recent trends in hill farming on Exmoor in the last decade, including a decrease in livestock numbers but that farming families with moorland were more resilient to change and likely to have named successors to continue the family farm. Finally, the recent increased numbers of archaeological finds on Exmoor, going back to the Mesolithic period was said by Dr Lee Bray, who did his PhD research at Exeter University to show the importance of Exmoor internationally for understanding the prehistoric period.

Other speakers and delegates highlighted the needed to find more about Exmoor and to bring together local as well as academic knowledge in order to manage this complex landscape sustainably.

Photos:

Back : Stewart Barr - Richard Brazier - Lee Bray - Robin Milton - Helen Blackman - Chris Binney

front : Keith Howe - Rachel Thomas [Society Ch.] - Mereil Martin

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Note to Editors:

The Exmoor Society exists to promote and organise action for the conservation and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and cultural heritage of Exmoor national park. It was established in 1958 and successfully fought proposals to afforest the Chains, the central moorland of Exmoor. It has continued to campaign against adverse changes and encourages people's understanding of the park's special qualities. It acts as an independent watchdog and champion for Exmoor's status as a national park.