

2016: 12th Annual Spring Conference – Exmoor’s Future Landscapes

Exmoor’s Future bigger, better, brighter for all

An upbeat conference held on Friday 22 April, that attracted first-rate national speakers and a full complement of delegates, came to the conclusion that Exmoor’s future was bigger, better and brighter for all. The theme of the conference: ‘Exmoor’s Future Landscapes’, mainly concentrated on Exmoor’s moorlands but also included other types such as woodlands and coast. Organised by The Exmoor Society, in partnership with the Exmoor National Park Authority, the conference was based on the findings of a recently commissioned report by the Society *Exmoor’s Moorlands – Where Next?* *

Natural England director, James Diamond, started his speech with remarkable honesty: ‘We have got so many things wrong and have not always raised our eyes to future challenges. Because of poor communications and lack of trust, we have not taken enough notice of local knowledge and combined it with expertise. Natural England has an important role to play as it spends £3.2 million each year to support grazing, swaling, re-wetting and using traditional ponies and cattle to manage moorland. There is now much better dialogue between ourselves and the farming community and a willingness to explore and adapt management practices that suit Exmoor’s unique environment.’ He stated that the role of farming is vital to future landscapes and that there is a huge amount of common ground. He finished by saying that we all need to better understand and value the wider benefits Exmoor’s upland landscapes provide and focus on outcomes and good relationships.

RSPB Director of Operations, Dr Shaun Thomas, called for everybody with a passion for Exmoor to work together to deliver a nature rich future for this special place. He said: “The essential building block is collaboration between conservation groups, farmers, landowners, statutory bodies and the public. And that collaboration depends on the care, passion and choices of the many who want to see Exmoor become a ‘cathedral’ to nature.” Dr Thomas added: “Only landscape-scale conservation of a kind not yet seen on Exmoor would lead to that nature rich future, and stop commonplace plants and animals from becoming rare, and the rare from disappearing altogether.”

Dr Andrea Graham, head of policy services at the National Farmers Union, told the conference that resilient and productive farm businesses were at the heart of a successful future for the uplands. “We must make sure that farming, in particular livestock farming, thrives. For farmers this means allowing them to modernise and develop their businesses so they can be viable, profitable and, as a result, more attractive to the next generation of upland farmers. The NFU has recently supported Dartmoor and Exmoor National Parks with their Rural Productivity bid which, if successful, will create new opportunities for agriculture and rural areas. Good internet connectivity is also vital and the NFU is actively lobbying government and service providers to push access to digital and mobile services in rural areas up the agenda as a matter of urgency. We must also ensure that the culture that created these great landscapes can thrive and become an example to the rest of our environment of how we managed to get it right.”

Outlining the importance of different experiences from different landscapes, Dr Cheryl Willis emphasised how these linked to people’s health, both physical and mental, and well-being. These experiences ranged from the challenge of wide open spaces to associations and memories of holidays. Much of her research findings were important for tourism marketing.

Peter Heaton-Jones MP, a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, informed the conference on the findings so far on its enquiry into flooding. He said evidence shows there is no ‘one-size that fits all’ solution such as planting trees in the uplands. In Exmoor’s case he acknowledged the results of the Mires Project in slowing down the release of water from the peat soils and therefore helping to protect place downstream.

Stanley Johnson brought the conference to an end by sharing examples of his own experience of farming on Exmoor and when working for the European Commission on, for example, the Habitats Directive.

Commenting after the conference, Rachel Thomas, Chairman of The Exmoor Society, said: ‘The lively debate was so encouraging and to see that there are many things in common between the different interests involved on Exmoor. Natural England emphasised that the role of farming was vital to future landscapes; the RSPB the importance of collaboration with key groups; and the NFU the role of farming in providing a range of goods and benefits as well as food production. The success of the day was summed up in a tweet from Nick Bruce-White - *Thank you @ExmoorSociety for an excellent conference. Good debate, passionate people & a healthy future in sight for #Exmoor.*