

Mire Vegetation Surveying

The Exmoor Mires Partnership



Interview with: Andy and Anne

Name of project: Vegetation Monitoring for the Exmoor Mires Partnership (previously *Project*) (EMP)

Location: Various sites across Exmoor

Funding: By the Exmoor Mires Partnership

Who set the project up: Vegetation surveys have been part of the EMP monitoring programme since inception in the late 1990s. In 2015 the Project allowed experienced volunteers to bid for the work. We did and we won!

Aims:

The aim of the EMP is to restore degraded areas of peat bog/mire back to more pristine habitat. Vegetation surveying is one method of assessing the success or otherwise of this work. Conducted on an approximate 3-year cycle each survey can be compared to previous ones.

How long has it been running for and has it changed over time?

The vegetation monitoring has been running in its current form for about 10 years, but earlier work started in the late 1990s. Since 2006 the surveying has gradually become more extensive and more systematic.

Main considerations:

- Delivering quality results to the Exmoor Mires Partnership, allowing them to assess their work
- Engaging the wider community, through volunteering opportunities
- The safety and wellbeing of those working on the surveying activities
- Ensuring that the work is both fun and informative, so that volunteers come away with a sense of purpose and reward.
- Good, clear communications with visible schedule
- Increasing the awareness of the Project

Those involved:

- The Surveyors, the EMP and volunteers
- Volunteers were recruited through advertisements within Exmoor National Park, awareness through other activities (e.g. Bogtastic) and through social media.
- Training days are run to ensure volunteers are both comfortable in the work being undertaken and confident that they can assist in the various activities

Partnerships and sources of advice:

Surveying activities can only be conducted with the agreement of the landowners. It was therefore important to approach them early in the process and allow them to express concerns about the intended work. Such concerns could then be addressed and overcome prior to starting the season's work.

Advice on survey techniques and subsequent analysis came through the EMP and other organisations, e.g. universities, other regional or national centres of expertise (e.g. botanical groups), up-to-date literature and references.



How was it undertaken:

- Surveying can only really be conducted during the summer months when the species are in leaf and flower and the weather makes for a conducive work environment. Wet weather days are neither good for clear and concise identification (the key element to any survey) nor are they good for volunteer and surveyor's moral!
- Surveying was conducted on a site by site basis, with each site taking up to 3 days to complete.
- Surveying days were advertised well in advance and where possible were the same recurrent days per week. This way volunteers, particularly, can plan ahead.
- Organisation of a day's activities is crucial so that initially people know where to go and meet but also that they feel engaged in the process from the start.

Constraints and limitations:

- Weather is a key constraint, not only for people's comfort but for safety too.
- Because the volunteers are crucial for completing the survey work accurately and efficiently, it is very important that we as leaders are very visibly involved in the survey process to ensure accurate recording and maintain morale. Team work and good morale on surveying days are key to maintaining a good source of volunteers.
- Knowledge of work being undertaken, addressed through focused and timely training
- Whilst understanding the tasks to be undertaken is clearly fundamental to the surveying process, equally important is understanding how much can be achieved in a day. Too much and people will tire and won't return, too little and they won't feel like they are achieving anything.

Outcomes and recommendations:

- The basic outcome from the surveying work is to establish if the restoration, undertaken several years before, is succeeding. So the main goal of the surveying work is to provide such evidence to the EMP so that they can modify their methods or plan some further interventions.
- Provide a record for the EMP so that each survey rotation can easily be compared to previous years.
- To increase the awareness of the EMP's work and aims through the involvement of the wider community.

Key considerations when managing volunteers:

Their safety and wellbeing are paramount, but this should be closely followed by enjoyment and engagement.

Volunteers will want to feel that their endeavours have been worthwhile and valuable. Establish good communications with them during your project and afterwards during the dissemination of results and findings.



Example of something you're pleased with:

The organisation of the weekly work programme lead to a good response from volunteers and to a good number of volunteers attending multiple days per week.

Data was collected and processed very efficiently, thus removing risks associated with misidentification.

Advice for anyone looking to set up a project:

- Plan what and when carefully and be prepared for changes caused by external influences (e.g. weather), but always maintain communication with those involved.
- If it is your first time try and not make your project too grand. It is much easier to establish a project if similar work has been done locally or elsewhere in the past - use the experience and results of others.
- Make it a fun experience and involve as many people and groups as possible to gain exposure and ultimately volunteers!