



Chalk Downland Conservation

As we all finally wake up to the damage we have done, and continue to inflict, on the planet it seems madness to be advocating clearing scrub and chopping down trees when planting and 'renaturing' are zeitgeist.

If you have walked up the Downs to the Black Cap nature reserve recently you may have noticed the National Trust is felling a lot of trees. The Ash trees are being felled because they are suffering from Chalara (Ash Dieback) and pose a hazard as they drop dead branches and ultimately fall over. The pile of tree butts are those of Turkey Oaks. These are being felled because they host one of the two phases of the Knapper gall wasp. This wasp requires the presence of both Turkey Oak (introduced into Britain in 1735) and our native Pedunculate Oak to complete its life cycle. In the latter species the wasp lays eggs in the developing acorn and the resultant gall distorts and damages to acorn itself. More importantly, however, like most invasive species, Turkey Oaks are proving to be good at spreading quickly across the Down grassland.

As well as the felling of trees, the NT and volunteers from other South Downs National Park conservation groups are clearing areas of bramble, thorn and dogwood. All this would appear to be the exact opposite of rewilding. Quite simply the reason is to protect and conserve what David Bellamy once described as the European equivalent of a tropical rainforest, the botanically diverse chalk grassland sward. Using hand tools, chainsaws, alpine mowers and herbicide, the object is to prevent this amazing grassland plant community being smothered by scrub and ultimately a canopy of trees.

Traditionally, these eastern Downs were the principal sheep rearing area of the South Downs and their glory is the fine sweet turf. The chalk was cleared of forest by early man and cultivated with rudimentary tools because it was easier to work the thin soils than the heavy clay of the Weald. Ultimately cultivation incorporated grazing animals and chalk grassland came into being on the sheep walk particularly on the steep north-facing scarp slope that could not be ploughed. Thus chalk grassland is very much the creation of man and sheep, it being a sheep-adapted community of plants that were capable of withstanding their constant nibbling. Consequently it is a vegetation type that relies on grazing for its initiation and continued existence. As livestock and rabbit numbers have dropped, brambles and scrub that are kept at bay by grazing quickly re-establish and smother the sward.

The sward can contain more 40 species of plants including Cowslip, Quaking-grass, Fairy Flax, Round-headed Rampion (the Pride of Sussex) and many species of orchids. So preserving these plant species establishes a broad base for a food pyramid that is necessary for the survival of flagship downland butterflies e.g. Adonis Blue (Horseshoe Vetch) Brown Argus (Common Rock-rose) and the Grayling (which is making its last stand on Downland around Wilmington) amongst a huge number of other insects ... and if you have insects then you get birds.

The conservationists are not in any way advocating the clearance of all the woody habitat on the Downs but are working towards establishing a patchwork of species-rich grazed grass, scrub and woodland grazing. You may have noticed how sheep and cattle move and graze across the steep scarp slope not from top to bottom. The objective is to encourage livestock on to and down the hill to graze. By clearing scrub, opening horizontal pathways along the steep slopes and turning the water troughs off on the top while keeping a water source at the bottom the outcome will hopefully mean the sheep and cattle will maintain the species rich areas with less intervention from us.

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