

# Target 2010

The condition of England's Sites of Special Scientific Interest in 2005



working towards *Natural England*  
for people, places and nature

# Foreword

Since 2000, when the Government set a target to bring 95 per cent of England's Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) into the very best condition by 2010, this Public Service Agreement (PSA) has been at the heart of English Nature's work. Since then, an enormous and ongoing effort has been made to restore these wonderful and precious places back to health and the fruits of this labour are plain to see. Back in September 2003, when English Nature first reported on progress towards the target, 58.3 per cent of England's SSSIs were in target condition. At the beginning of 2006 that figure has risen to 69.8 per cent or, to put it another way, the area of land meeting the 2010 target has risen by more than 130,000 hectares – an area more than three times the size of the Isle of Wight!

For this marked progress, a great deal of credit and thanks is due to the 32,000 land managers of England's SSSIs. Whether major landowners or responsible for just a few hectares, their hard work, in partnership with English Nature and Defra, has been the foundation of this fantastic accomplishment. However, whilst there is a lot to celebrate, undeniably there remains a long way to go. The continued support and efforts of our partners will be crucial if the 2010 target is to be achieved.

From October 2006, responsibility for championing delivery of the 2010 target passes to *Natural England* – a new organisation resulting from a merger of English Nature, Defra's Rural Development Service and the Landscape, Access and Recreation function of the Countryside Agency. As part of a broader biodiversity and landscape remit, the 2010 target will remain a core focus, and *Natural England* will be ready to take up the challenge and build on the excellent work to date. Thanks to the commitment of our partners, it will take on the SSSI series in better condition than it has ever been, with the prospect of delivering a series of sites that will, in a few years, present an exemplar to the world of nature conservation management – a lasting and important legacy for *Natural England* to take forward.

**Sir Martin Doughty**  
Chair Designate of  
*Natural England*

## What is the PSA target?

Public Service Agreements (PSA) were first introduced in 1998, to modernise and improve the Government's performance on the issues that matter most to the public – including education, health, crime and the environment. This has involved setting ambitious and publicly accountable targets across the whole of Government.

As the Government department responsible for the environment, Defra has signed nine PSAs aimed at providing a better quality of life and a healthier environment for everyone in Britain. Targets have been set for topics ranging from sustainable development and air quality to recycling and greenhouse gas emissions.

One of Defra's PSAs is "to care for our natural heritage, make the countryside attractive and enjoyable for all and preserve biological diversity." It includes two targets:

- Reversing the long-term decline in the number of farmland birds by 2020.
- Bringing into favourable condition 95 per cent of all nationally important wildlife sites (Sites of Special Scientific Interest) by 2010.

The adoption of SSSI condition as a Government target has been significant. Together with the status of farmland birds, SSSI condition is now regarded as the key indicator of the health of biodiversity in the country.

# Introduction

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are nationally important nature conservation sites. They support England's very best wildlife and geology and include many of our most spectacular natural assets. There are 4,118 SSSIs in England, covering 7.5 per cent of the country's land area. As the Government's adviser on nature conservation in England, English Nature has a special responsibility for the conservation of these special places.

In 2003, for the first time, English Nature reported on the condition of all SSSIs in England. This followed a six-year period during which English Nature conservation staff visited every SSSI and assessed their condition using standard national criteria. The resulting report, *England's best wildlife and geological sites* (English Nature 2003), provided a comprehensive analysis of SSSI condition

throughout England and identified the key reasons why some SSSI habitats are not as good as they should be. This report reviews the current situation in England and details the progress made towards the 2010 target since September 2003. It summarises the major factors affecting SSSI condition and the key actions that need to be carried out over the next five years if the target is to be achieved.

In addition to this national summary are nine regional reports – one for each of England's regions – taking a more focused look at the particular challenges around the country. The reports are aimed at Government departments, public decision-makers, legislators and regulators, voluntary conservation organisations, owners and managers and other partners who, working together with *Natural England* can help achieve the 2010 target.

## How we assess the condition of SSSIs

All land designated as SSSI in England is part of the Government's 2010 PSA target, whether in target condition or not in target condition. In fact, English Nature uses five categories to assess the condition of SSSIs, which are:

**Favourable** when special habitat and species features are in a healthy state and are being conserved for the future by appropriate management.

**Unfavourable recovering** when all necessary management measures are in place to address the reasons why the site is not in target condition – if these measures are sustained, the site will recover over time.

**Unfavourable no change** or **unfavourable declining** where the special features of a site are not being adequately conserved, or are deteriorating or being lost.

**Destroyed / partially destroyed** this relates to a very small number of sites where there has been fundamental and lasting damage, which means the special features have been lost permanently. Target condition cannot be achieved at such sites.

For the purposes of this report, we concentrate on SSSI land in target condition (made up of SSSIs in favourable and unfavourable recovering condition) and SSSI land not in target condition (made up of SSSIs in unfavourable no change, unfavourable declining, and part-destroyed/destroyed condition).

# Progress towards the 2010 target since September 2003

In the past two years, excellent progress has been made towards the 2010 PSA target. At the end of 2005, 69.8 per cent of England's SSSIs were in target condition. Figure 1 shows the position at 31 December 2005 for the five categories that English Nature uses to assess SSSI condition (see box on page 3). The areas shown in green are in target condition.

Figure 1 Condition of SSSIs in England at 31 December 2005

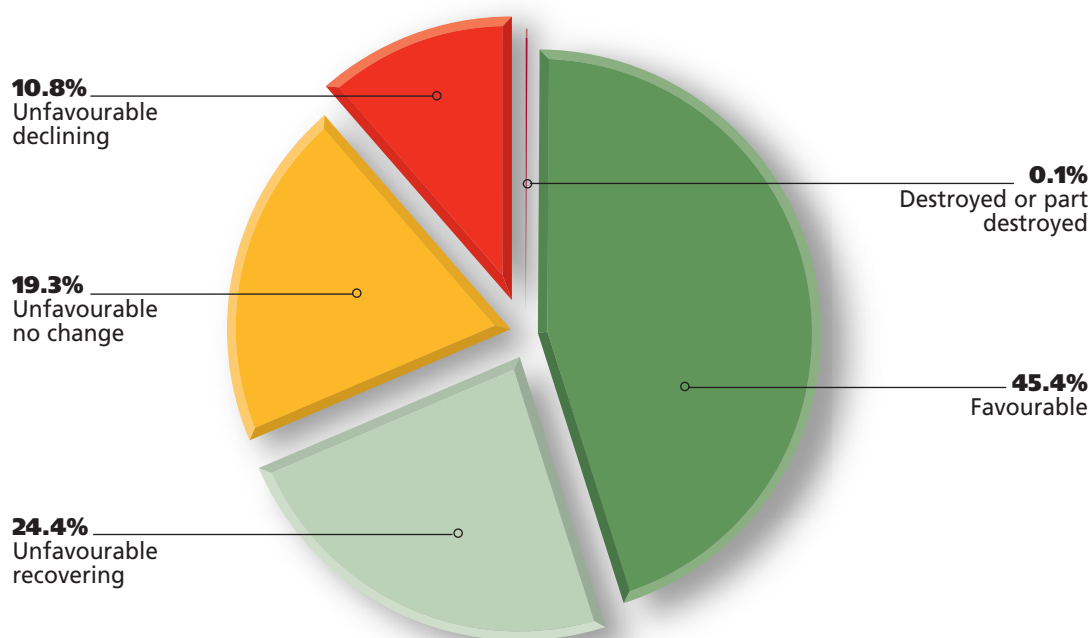


Figure 2 uses the simpler categories of SSSI land in target condition and SSSI land not in target condition to show how far we have moved forward since

September 2003. The conversion of more than 10 per cent of England's SSSI land into target condition in this short time is an outstanding achievement and

testimony to the efforts of the large number of partner individuals and organisations whose ongoing support is required between now and 2010.

**Figure 2** Progress towards the PSA target since September 2003

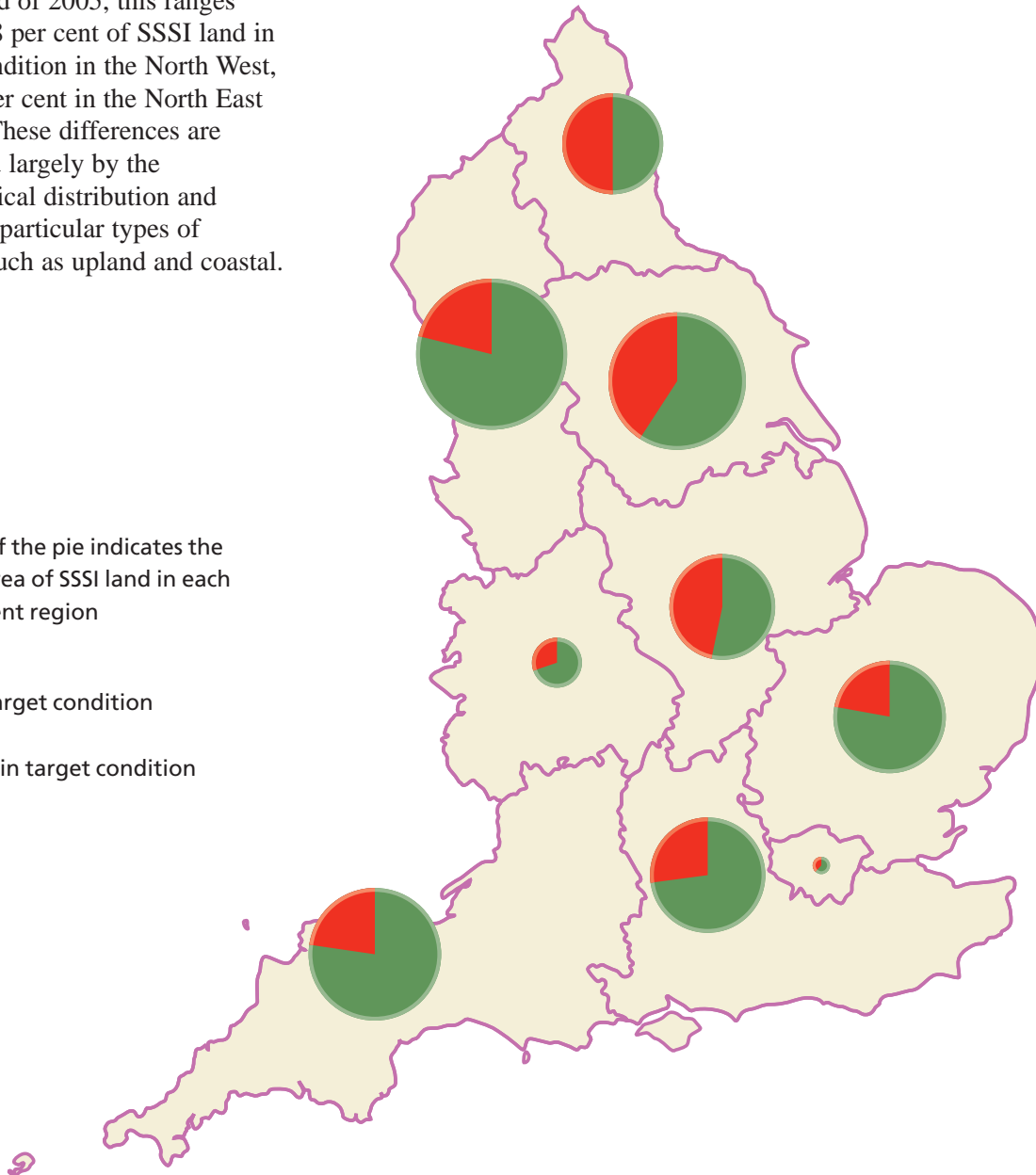
	In target condition		Not in target condition	
	%	Area (ha)	%	Area (ha)
September 2003	58.3	612,751	41.7	438,266
December 2005	69.8	745,804	30.2	322,782

There is considerable variation between the regions (Figure 3). At the end of 2005, this ranges from 78.8 per cent of SSSI land in target condition in the North West, to 50.7 per cent in the North East region. These differences are explained largely by the geographical distribution and extent of particular types of habitat, such as upland and coastal.

**Figure 3** The condition of SSSIs in England's government regions on 31 December 2005

The size of the pie indicates the relative area of SSSI land in each government region

- In target condition
- Not in target condition



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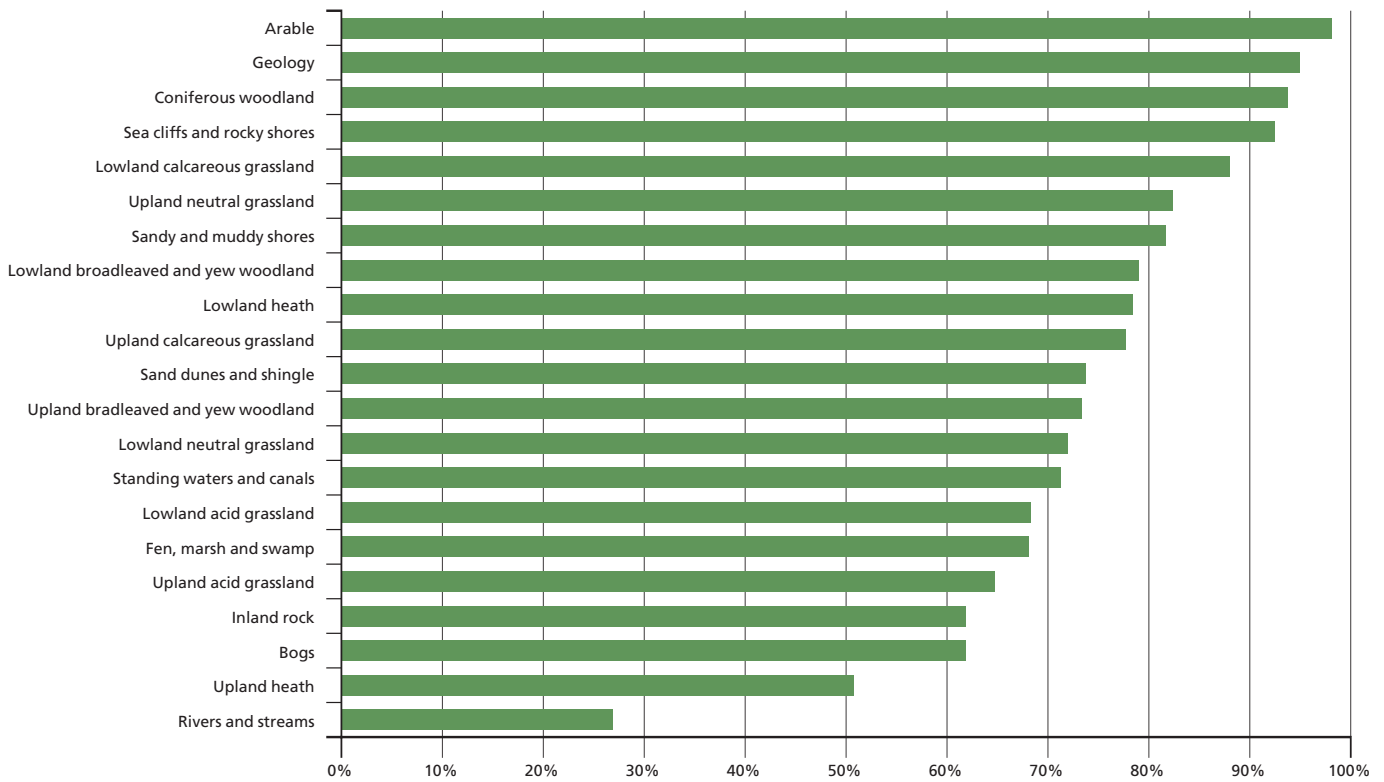
# The condition of SSSI habitats in 2005

SSSIs in England are broadly divided into 21 habitat types, ranging from the moorland and bogs of the uplands, through woodlands and grasslands, to aquatic and geological sites and the specialised habitats of the coast. Figure 4 lists all of these habitats and the percentage in target condition at the end of 2005.



Lizard orchid, Devil's Dyke SSSI, Cambridgeshire. Pete Strohn/Natural Treasures

**Figure 4** SSSI habitats in England (percentage in target condition)

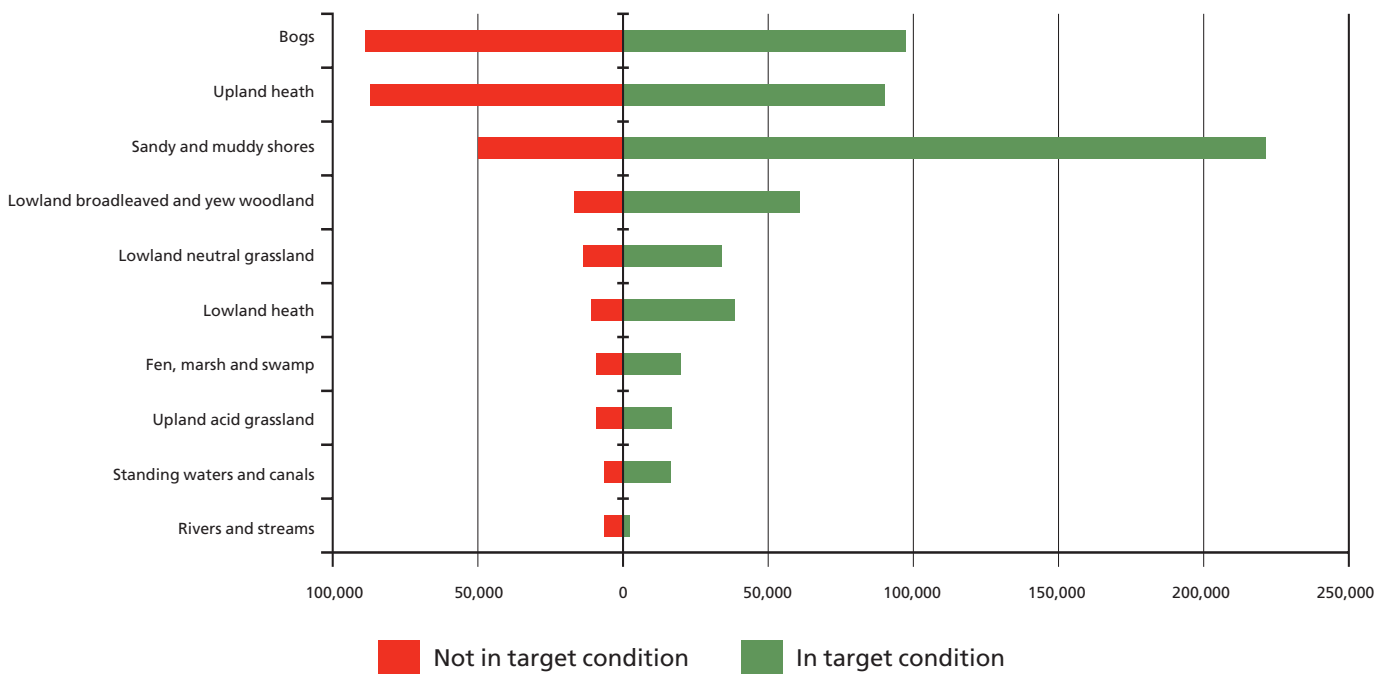


By percentage of area, the habitat in the worst condition is rivers and streams. Although not a major contributor to the overall area of SSSIs in England, the condition of this habitat is cause for serious concern. By 2010 we want to see all habitats in good condition, including rivers and

streams. However, as Figure 5 shows, the area of each SSSI habitat varies considerably, and inevitably a sharper focus is brought to those habitats which have the biggest areas of land not in target condition. Nationally, this means prioritising efforts and resources on the upland and

coastal habitats that can make the greatest contribution to the 2010 target. Of the 320,000 hectares of SSSI still not in target condition in England, more than 225,000 hectares can be accounted for by just three habitats – bogs, upland heath, and sandy and muddy shores.

**Figure 5** Top10 SSSI habitats ordered by greatest area (ha) not in target condition



# Why some habitats are not in target condition

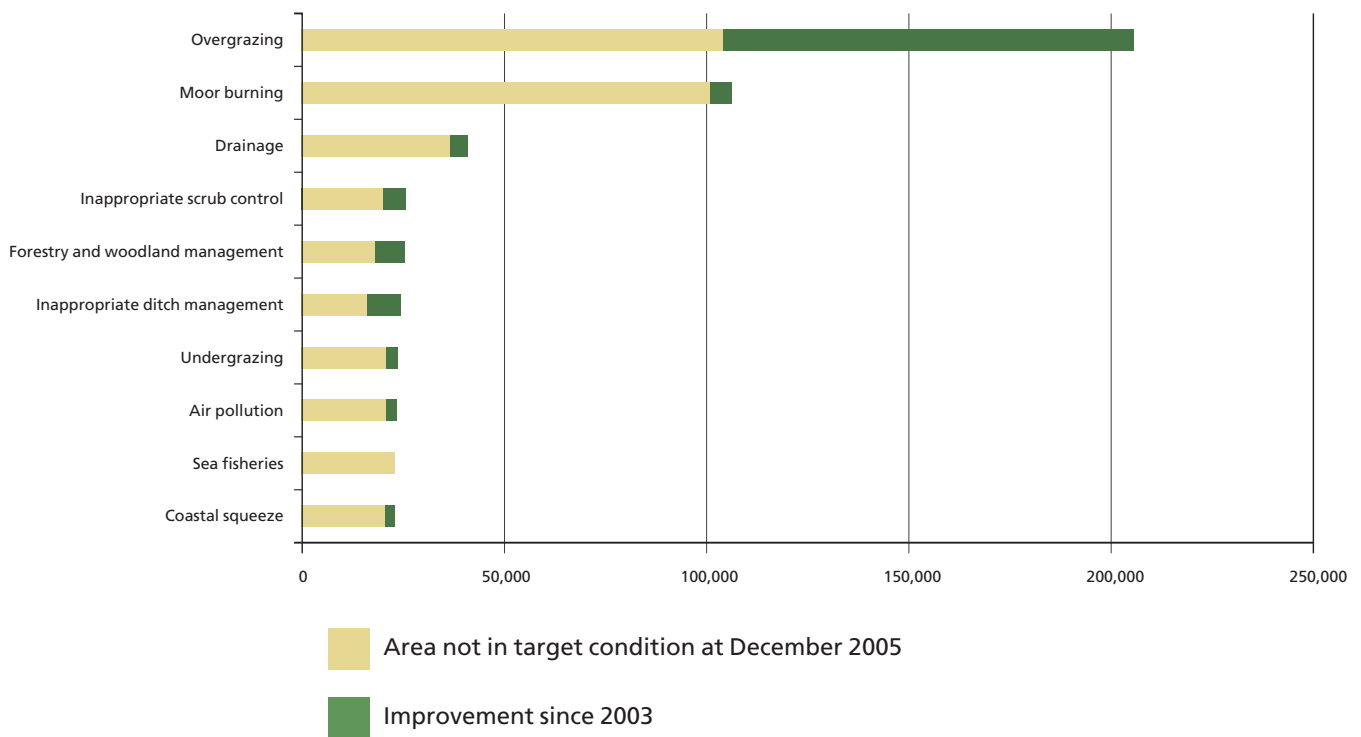
The main reasons why some SSSI habitats are not in target condition are well understood. Nationally, English Nature has identified 42 separate factors that affect SSSI condition. A comprehensive description of these is provided in an earlier publication - *England's best wildlife and geological sites* (English Nature 2003). Figure 6 shows, by area, the top ten factors influencing SSSI condition in England at the end of 2005 - each affecting more than 20,000 hectares of SSSI. The green section shows where an improvement has been made in the last two years – for example, since 2003, overgrazing is no longer a problem on over 100,000 hectares of SSSI land.

River Derwent and Tributaries SSSI, Cumbria. Peter Wakely/English Nature 15,030





**Figure 6** Why some SSSI land in England is not in target condition - top ten causes by area



In many cases, a single SSSI will be affected by a several factors that prevent it from being in target condition. In such situations, each cause must be tackled and resolved in order to allow the site to move into target condition.

For example, many upland SSSIs are affected by overgrazing, moor burning, drainage, air pollution and ditch management, as well as other factors. Overgrazing is the single biggest problem affecting England’s upland SSSIs. Grazing by too many sheep on a moorland can quickly turn it from species-rich heath into species-poor grassland, and can also cause soil erosion affecting water quality as run-off increases, in turn causing higher river flows and siltation. Moor burning is the other major factor in the uplands. Done well, this centuries old management practice can be very positive, creating ideal conditions for the animals and plants that rely on heathland. However, when fires are too hot or frequent, or where burning takes place on particularly sensitive habitats, the damage caused can be long-lasting and difficult to repair.

Similarly, the condition of coastal habitats may be affected by more than one factor, some very complicated. For example, a naturally functioning ecosystem would allow habitats such as saltmarsh to migrate inland in response to the long-term sea level rises being experienced around England’s coast. Coastal squeeze is the term used to describe the impact on these habitats when they are trapped between rising sea levels and fixed sea defences – a

situation likely to be compounded as climate change brings about additional rises in sea level. Sea fisheries are another serious issue for some coastal habitats. As inshore fishing techniques have become more intensive their impact on SSSIs has increased. Fishing by bottom dredging and suction dredging can be particularly damaging, unintentionally destroying reefs and mussel beds and disturbing the natural conditions of the seabed.

Large skipper, Glapthorn Cow Pasture SSSI, Northamptonshire. Pete Stroh/Natural Treasures





Sea campion, Hope's Nose to Wall's Hill SSSI, Devon. Pete Strohm/Natural Treasures

## The road to 2010

At the end of 2005, progress towards the 2010 target remains on course. We know that 69.8 per cent of England's SSSIs are in target condition. We also have a good understanding of the reasons why the remaining 30.2 per cent are not. Over the next five years the challenge is to ensure that this remaining area meets the 2010 target, and at the same time, take care that SSSIs already in target condition stay that way. To achieve this we need to be clear about what needs to be done.

To tackle this critical step, English Nature established a Remedies Project in 2004 which has drawn together detailed information on every SSSI in England. Each SSSI may be sub-divided into separate units, depending on habitat type and management of the site. For each unit not in target condition, the project:

- defines the actions needed to address these causes;
- details the mechanisms that will enable the necessary actions to be carried out;
- identifies the organisations and individuals who are best placed to implement those actions and mechanisms, and
- enables and secures the agreement of land managers to ensure the actions are carried through.

By having such a good understanding of the required actions, the Remedies Project is also able to provide a realistic timetable for bringing individual sites into target condition. Figure 7 below lists the ten most important remedies that have been identified in England in terms of the area of SSSI that can be brought into target condition.

**Figure 7** Remedies for bringing SSSIs in England into target condition - the top 10 by area

Remedy	Organisations who can help deliver the remedy	SSSI habitats that will benefit most from the remedy	Area of SSSI that would benefit from the remedy (ha)
New/renew Management Agreements	English Nature	Bogs, upland heath	116,880
New Environmental Stewardship - Higher Level Schemes	Defra Rural Development Service	Upland heath, bogs, lowland neutral grassland	59,330
Issue appropriate notices and consents	English Nature	Upland heath, bogs	39,995
Direct management	Forestry Commission, English Nature, Water companies, Local Authorities, Voluntary Conservation Organisations, National Park Authorities, Wildlife Trusts	Bogs, lowland broadleaved and yew woodland, lowland heath	38,849
Modify existing Environmentally Sensitive Area schemes	Defra Rural Development Service	Bogs, upland heath	33,887
Review of discharge/pollution, prevention and control consents	Environment Agency	Sandy and muddy shores, bogs	28,582
Make new bylaws or enforcing existing ones	Eastern Sea Fisheries Committee	Sandy and muddy shores	23,513
Tenancy negotiations	Water companies, Defence organisations, Local Authorities	Upland heath, bogs	23,462
Flood Risk Management Works	Environment Agency	Sandy and muddy shores	22,555
Modify existing Countryside Stewardship Schemes	Defra Rural Development Service	Bogs, upland heath	12,004

# Working together

The most important aspect of delivering the target is co-ordinating effort and commitment across the widest range of organisations and individuals. With our partners' co-operation and expertise, we have made substantial progress over the last two years. This has given us a solid foundation from which to take forward commitment, and to identify and deliver specific actions by partners. Whilst we work with over 32,000 individuals around the country, there are a few key organisations that own or manage large areas of SSSI - partners described as the Major Landowners. They have a critical role in helping *Natural England* meet the 2010 target. Figure 8 provides a summary of the SSSI holdings and condition for the major landowners at the end of 2005.

This table shows the areas of SSSI land owned by each body - it does not necessarily mean that they are responsible for the reasons why their SSSI land is not in target condition. In many cases, there will be factors affecting the

condition of a site that the land owner is not in a position to do anything about, and which require action by other individuals or organisations. At the time of going to press, English Nature is working to reach final agreement

with these partners and others to identify, in such situations, who is responsible for taking action. In the near future we will be able to show the area of SSSI holding for which the individual landholder has agreed responsibility.



Beck Hole SSSI, North Yorkshire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 12,759

**Figure 8** Major landowners and the condition of their SSSIs at the end of 2005

Organisation	Total area (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (%)
Crown Estate (Marine)	182,154	148,701	82%
MoD	70,189	53,451	76%
Forest Enterprise	67,721	50,940	75%
National Trust	65,713	43,320	66%
English Nature	57,900	46,320	80%
Local Authorities	52,340	38,437	73%
Water Companies	39,597	21,607	55%
Ports and Harbours Authorities	34,440	32,788	95%
Wildlife Trusts	34,343	28,080	82%
RSPB	28,736	23,374	81%
National Parks	19,084	13,395	70%
Crown Estate (Rural)	8,548	7,162	84%
Environment Agency	5,203	4,110	79%

# Why the PSA target is so important

Achieving the PSA target is about much more than protecting England's best wildlife sites. Whilst healthy SSSIs have long been considered essential to the conservation of our rarest habitats and species, awareness of the wider value of these special sites is growing. They perform many important 'ecosystem services' – upland moorlands that capture and provide our water supplies, saltmarshes that protect our coasts from rising seas, and natural floodplains that buffer towns from flash flooding. In addition, SSSIs create social wealth, by offering people the simple enjoyment of a quiet walk in the countryside, or the chance to learn about our natural world. Last but not least, a vibrant countryside contributes to economic wealth and provides opportunities for local and regional eco-tourism. Achieving the Government's PSA target is vital if we are to secure these wide-ranging benefits for our future generations.

English Nature firmly believes the target is realistic and achievable. The system now in place to bring our SSSIs into target condition is world-class - it has been a huge step forward to have an environmental target with clear measures at the heart of Government. It is also clear that in order to achieve the 2010 target, there is a continuing need to build on the strong partnership approach

that now exists. To address outstanding issues will require truly co-ordinated action by many and, crucially, the dedication of significant resources.

The responsibility for overseeing this process passes to *Natural England* later this year. The creation of the new organisation has already begun. Since April 2005, English Nature, the

Landscape, Access and Recreation elements of the Countryside Agency, and Defra's Rural Development Service have been working together as partners to deliver joint outcomes and pave the way for *Natural England* whilst continuing to deliver their separate and respective statutory duties. Achieving the 2010 PSA target will remain a vital area of work for the new organisation.







English Nature, the Rural Development Service and the Countryside Agency. Working in partnership to conserve and enhance our landscapes and natural environment, to promote countryside access and recreation as well as public well-being, now and for future generations.

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Top left: Bluebells, Bedford Purlieus SSSI, Cambridgeshire.  
Pete Stroh/Natural Treasures  
Middle left: SSSI Award Winner - Magpie Bottom SSSI, Kent.  
Paul Glendell/English Nature  
Bottom left: Parasol mushroom in heather, Thetford Heaths  
SSSI, Suffolk. Paul Glendell/English Nature 22,759  
Main: Children on fallen beech, Knole Park SSSI, Kent.  
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