

Target 2010 – South West

The condition of the region's Sites of Special Scientific Interest in 2005



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



Algae in rock pool, Lundy SSSI, Devon. Paul Glendelly/English Nature 24,272

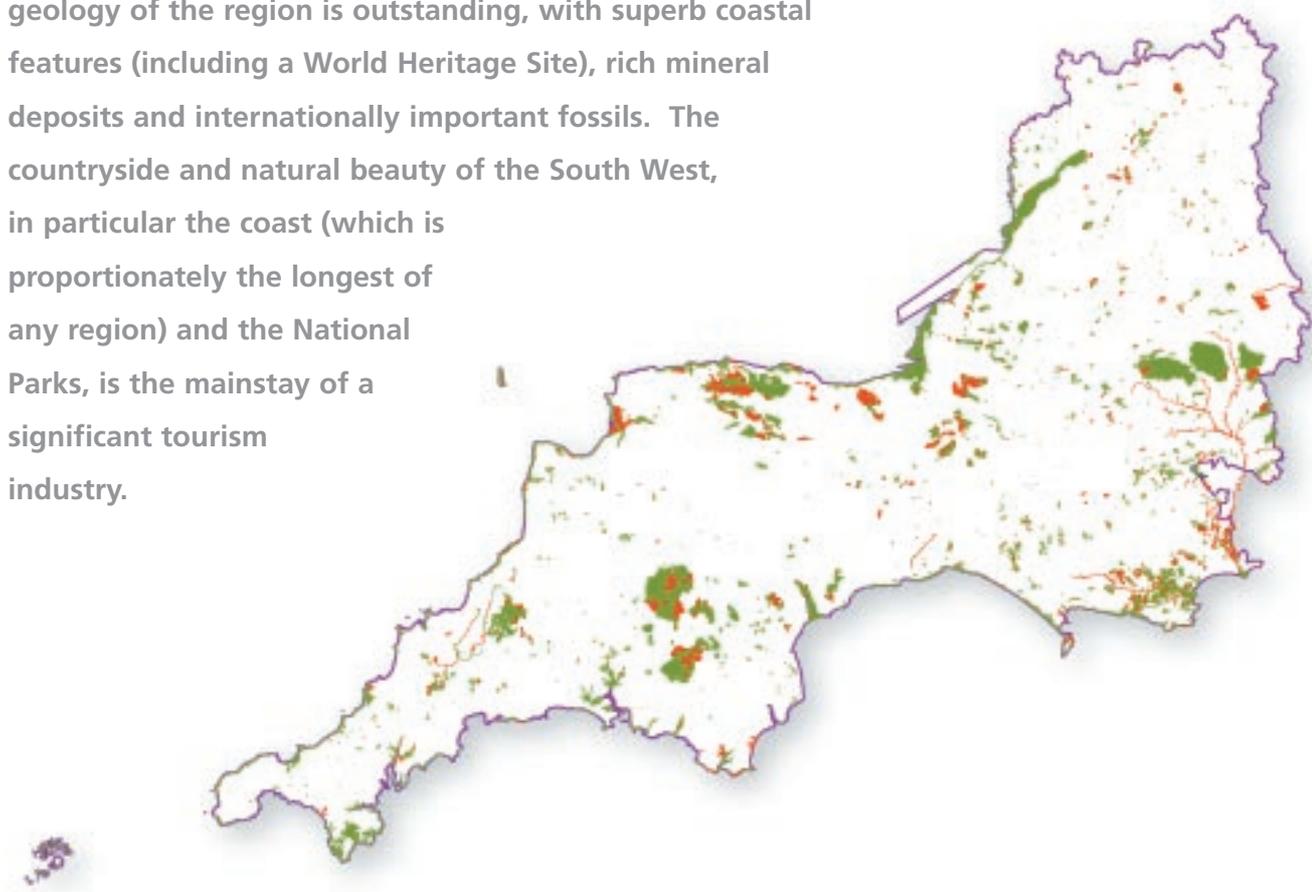
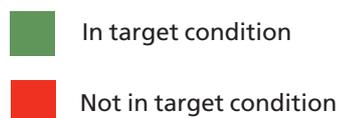
Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are the very best wildlife and geological sites in England. The Government has signed a Public Service Agreement (PSA) to ensure that by area, 95 per cent of these sites are in the best possible condition (target condition) by 2010.

This publication is one of nine regional documents produced as sister publications to the national report *Target 2010 – the condition of England’s Sites of Special Scientific Interest in 2005* (English Nature 2006). It reviews the current situation in the South West and details the progress that has been made towards the 2010 target since September 2003. It summarises the major factors affecting SSSI condition and some of the key actions that need to be carried out over the next five years if the target is to be achieved in the region. The report should be read in conjunction with the Target 2010 report mentioned above, which sets the national context and also contains useful definitions of the Government’s PSA for SSSIs, and what is meant by target condition.

The South West picture

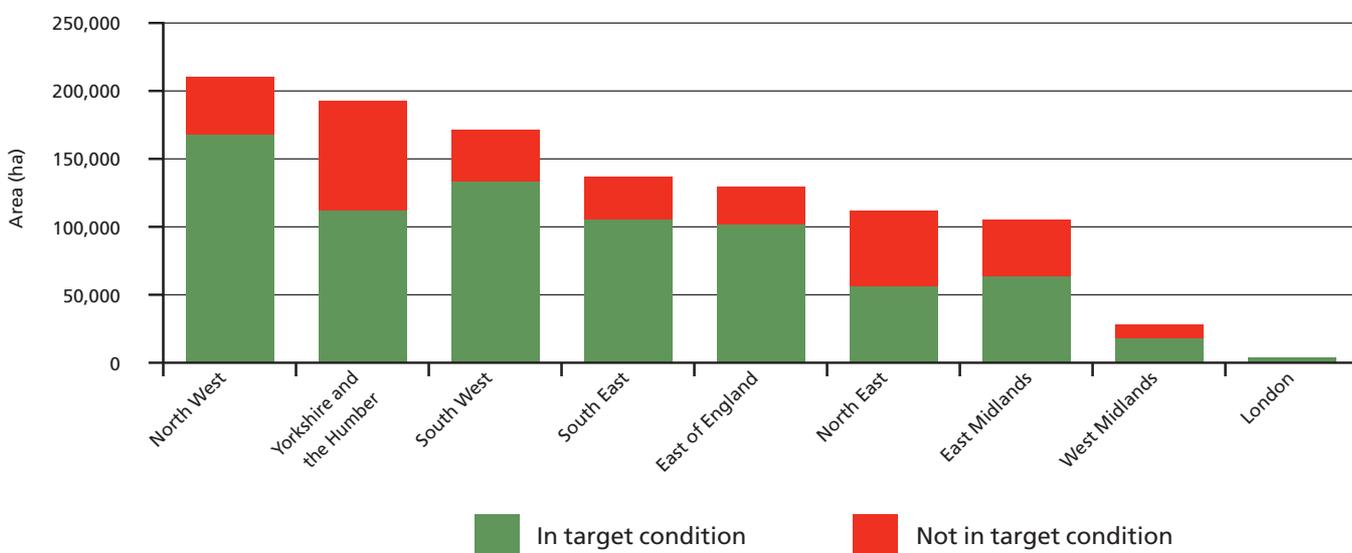
The South West region comprises the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire and the former county of Avon. It is home to a rich and diverse wildlife. There is an outstanding diversity of habitats and species that are very rare, and of very high quality, of which the region can be justifiably proud. Prime examples include the heathland of Dorset, the uplands of Dartmoor and Exmoor, the wet grasslands of Somerset, the varied wet heath of the Culm Measures in Devon, the rolling chalk downlands of Wiltshire and the outstanding lowland heath and coastal grassland of the Lizard in Cornwall. In addition, the varied geology of the region is outstanding, with superb coastal features (including a World Heritage Site), rich mineral deposits and internationally important fossils. The countryside and natural beauty of the South West, in particular the coast (which is proportionately the longest of any region) and the National Parks, is the mainstay of a significant tourism industry.

Figure 1 - Distribution and condition of SSSI units in the South West



There are 968 SSSIs in the South West covering almost 169,000 hectares - about 16 per cent of all SSSI land in England. This is a significant proportion of the national total, explained in part by the fact that this is the largest region and that there are extensive areas of upland, coast and estuaries. Of the nine English regions, the South West contains the third largest area of SSSI land and, with 77.5 per cent, has the fourth largest percentage meeting the 2010 target.

Figure 2 Area and condition of SSSIs in England’s nine government regions



Progress towards the 2010 target

In the past two years excellent progress has been made towards the 2010 PSA target in the South West. Back in September 2003, 67.8 per cent of SSSI land in the region was in target condition - a figure that, as of 31 December 2005, has risen to 77.5 per cent (Figure 3) - some way ahead of the national figure of 69.8 per cent. This considerable improvement is an excellent achievement and, in terms of area, means that nearly 16,000 hectares of SSSI have been brought into target condition in the South West during this period. This reflects the hard work of landowners, managers and organisations able to fund and deliver the necessary work, and often involves many years of careful land stewardship and management. However, with almost 38,000 hectares of SSSI land not in target condition, there is clearly still a great deal of effort required over the next five years in order to achieve the PSA target by 2010.

Figure 3 Progress towards PSA target in the South West since September 2003

	In target condition		Not in target condition	
	%	Area (ha)	%	Area (ha)
September 2003	67.8	115,294	32.2	54,829
December 2005	77.5	131,081	22.5	37,924

All land designated as SSSI in England is part of the Government’s 2010 PSA target. English Nature uses five categories to assess the condition of SSSIs. These categories (described in the national Target

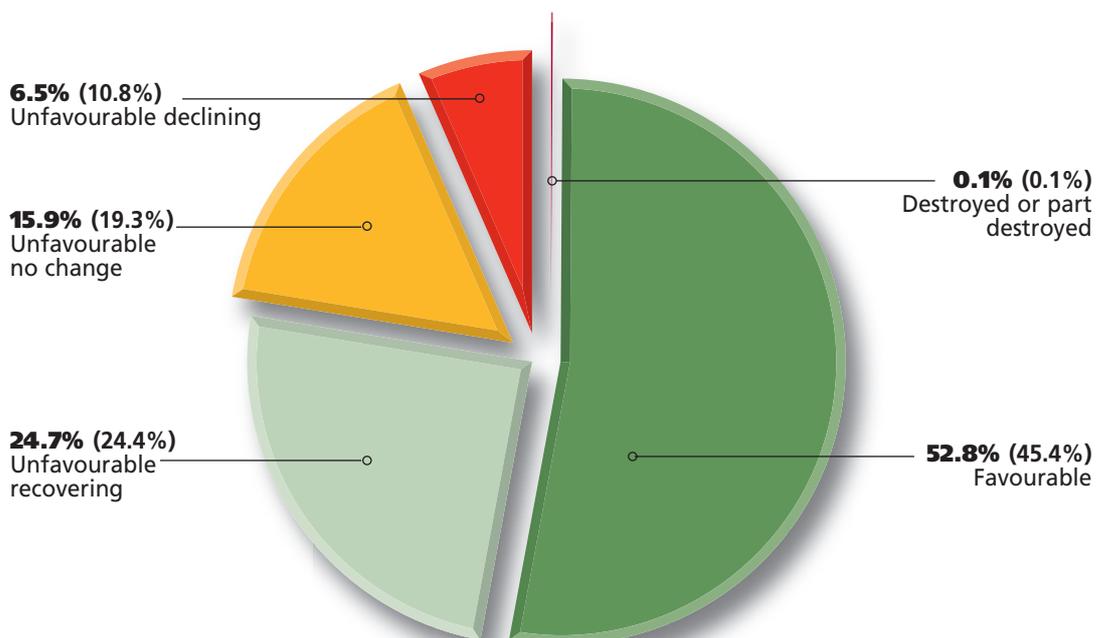
2010 report) are shown in Figure 4, which also compares the current regional and national positions. For the purposes of this report, however, we concentrate on the two main categories – SSSI land in target condition (made up of

SSSIs in favourable and unfavourable recovering condition) and SSSI land which is not in target condition (made up of SSSIs in unfavourable no change, unfavourable declining, part-destroyed or destroyed condition).



Lulworth Cove, South Dorset Coast SSSI, Dorset. Peter Wakely/English Nature 13,083

Figure 4 Condition of SSSIs in the South West at 31 December 2005 (national status in brackets)

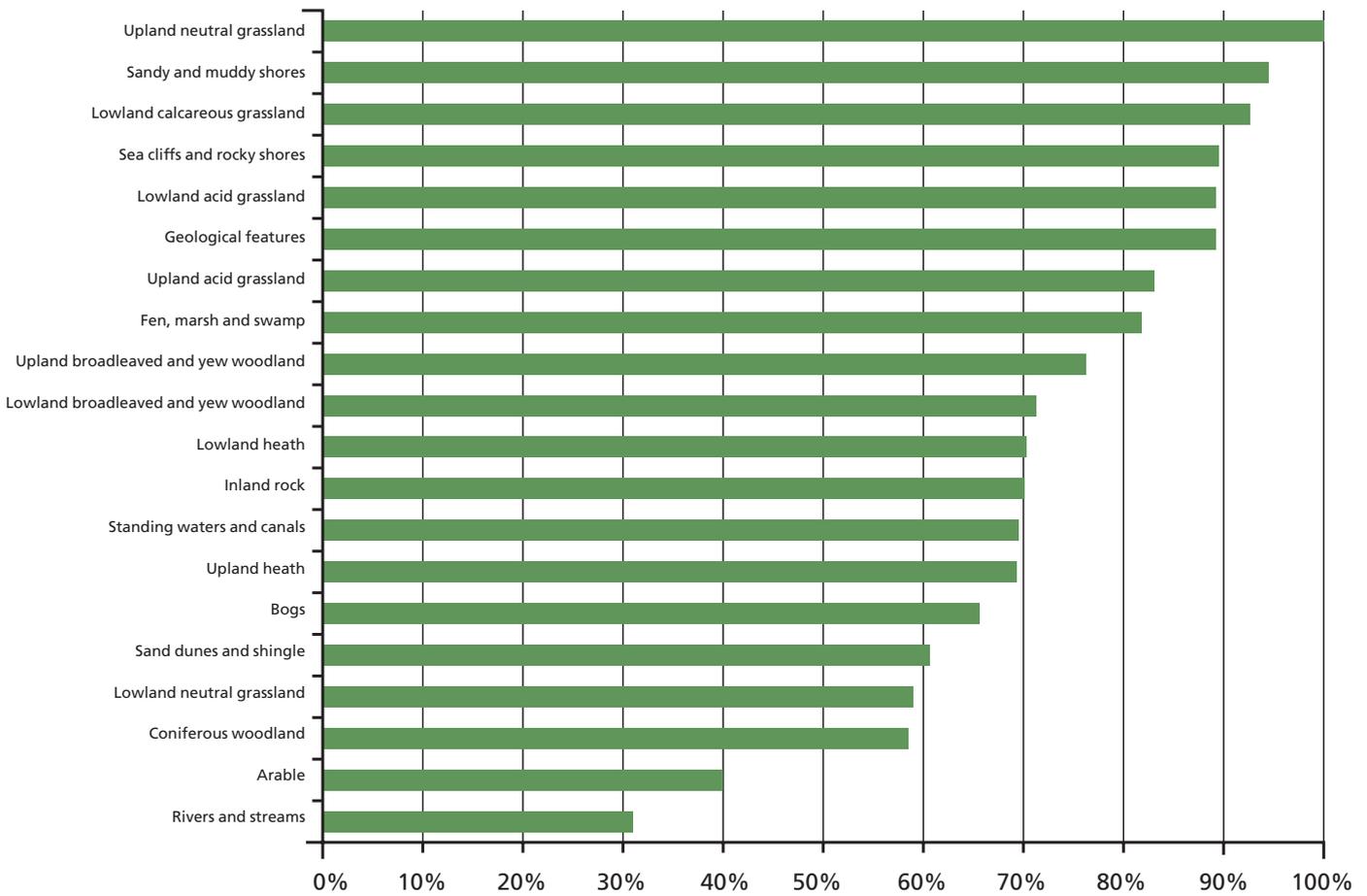


Condition of SSSI habitats in the South West

Nationally, SSSIs are broadly divided into 21 habitat types, 20 of which are found in the South West. These range from extensive bogs and heaths, through grassland and woodland habitats to geological sites and the many specialised habitats of the coast. There are no montane habitats in the South West. Figure 5 lists the main SSSI habitats found in the region and shows their condition at the end of 2005.



Figure 5 SSSI habitats in the South West (percentage in target condition)

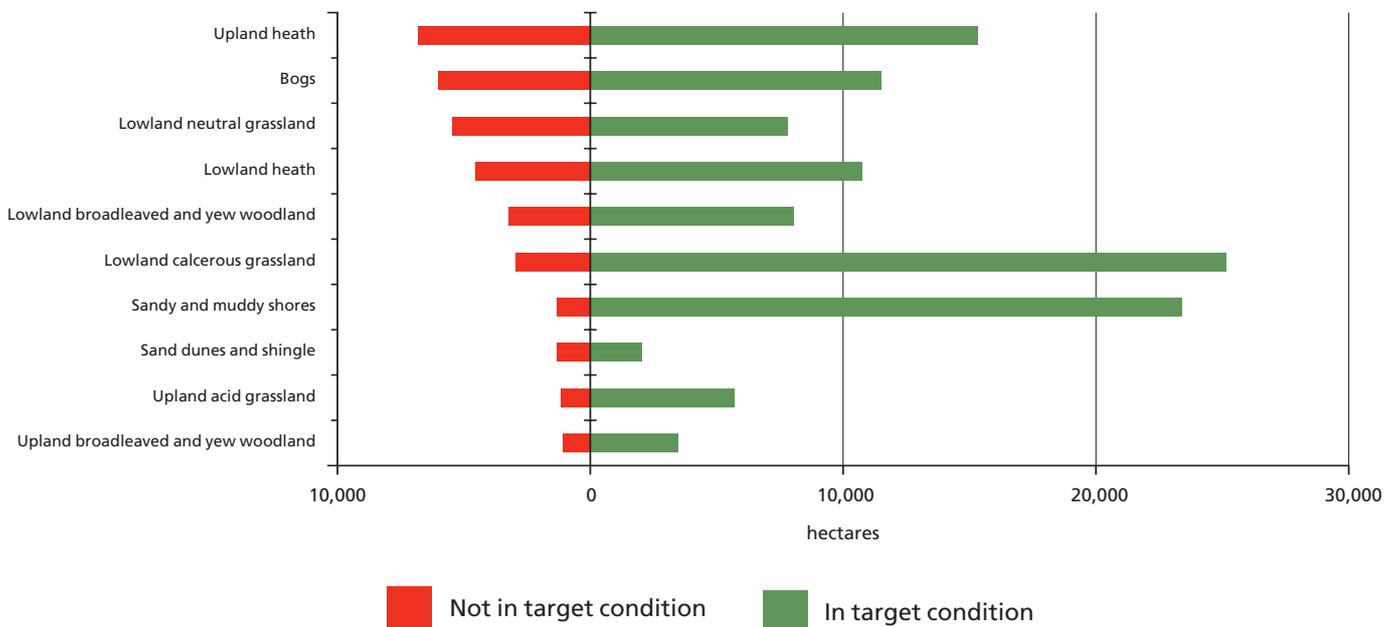


By percentage of area, the habitat in the worst condition is rivers and streams, as is the case nationally. This reflects the complexity of bringing freshwater into target condition, although there have been vast improvements made in water quality during the last few years. By 2010, we would want to see all

habitats in the region in good condition including rivers and streams. However, as Figure 6 shows, the area of each SSSI habitat varies widely and, inevitably, a sharper focus is brought to those habitats where the largest areas of land can be brought into target condition. In the South West this

means prioritising efforts on the upland, grassland and woodland habitats that can make the greatest contribution to the 2010 target. Of the 38,000 hectares of SSSI land still not in target condition in the region, over 26,000 hectares can be accounted for by just five habitat types.

Figure 6 SSSI habitats in the South West – top ten in order of greatest area that is not in target condition

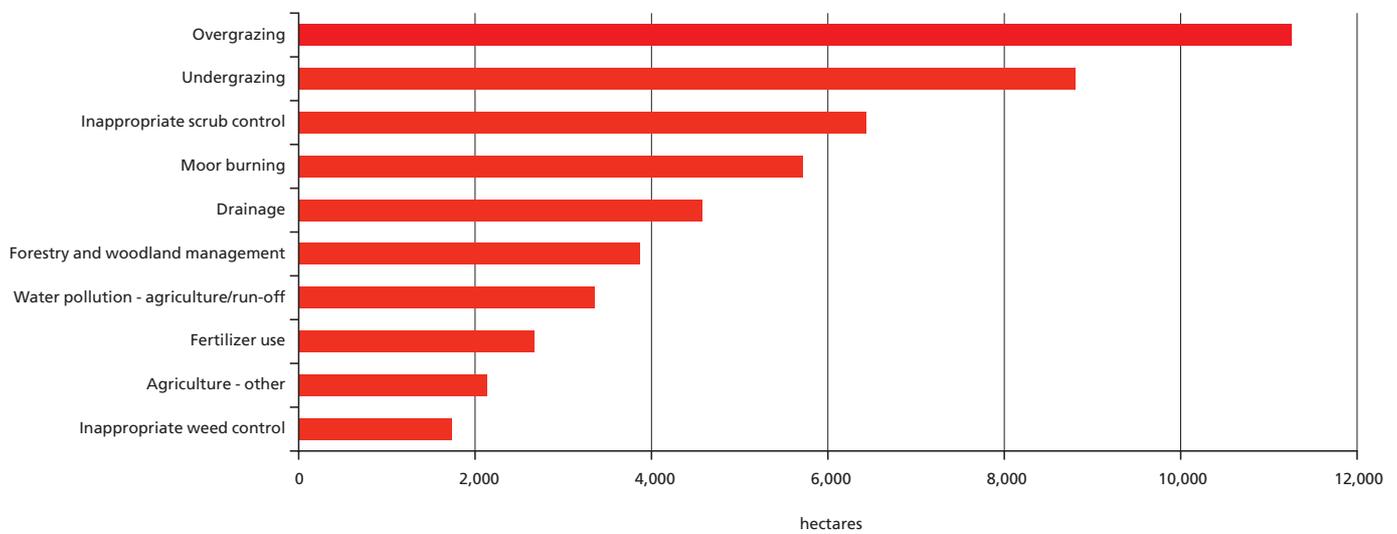


Why some habitats in the South West are not in target condition

The main reasons why some SSSI land is not in target condition are well understood, as are the type of habitats on which they impact, although the solutions are often complex. Nationally English Nature has identified 42 different causes, a comprehensive description of which is provided in an earlier publication (*England's best wildlife and geological sites* - English Nature, 2003). Figure 7 shows the main causes for the South West.



Figure 7 Why SSSIs in the South West are not in target condition



In many cases, a single SSSI will be affected by a range of factors that prevent it from being in target condition. For example, many upland SSSIs are affected by overgrazing, moor burning and drainage (and other causes). In such situations, each cause must be tackled and resolved or the site will still not meet target condition – again emphasising just how big the challenge is to bring upland sites into target condition.

Overgrazing – 11,254 hectares

Grazing by too many sheep on moorland can quickly turn it from heath into species-poor grassland. Overgrazing also leads to soil erosion and can affect water quality as run-off increases and causes higher river flows and siltation. This is the single biggest problem affecting our upland SSSIs, and one that also occurs in bog, limestone grassland and woodland habitats.

Undergrazing – 8,811 hectares

Over the last few decades, wide-scale changes in agricultural management from mixed farming to intense arable and dairy production have had a damaging effect on many important lowland habitats. Semi-natural grasslands, previously grazed by hardy breeds of cattle and sheep have

become neglected as their commercial value has dropped. This has led to a rapid deterioration of flower-rich grassland SSSIs as scrub and invasive weedy plants have taken over.

Scrub control – 6,441 hectares

Many lowland grassland SSSIs have been affected by major changes in farming practices in the last century which saw a large movement away from mixed farming to all arable or intensive dairy and beef farming. In many cases, the hardy breeds that were able to thrive on the lower nutritional value of semi-natural grassland are no longer an economic option. Their disappearance has effectively removed the important scrub control function they carried out on many SSSIs.

Moor burning – 5,718 hectares

Managing upland habitats by burning has been practised for centuries. Done well, it 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.

Drainage – 4,575 hectares

Drainage is a significant cause of SSSIs in the south west not reaching target condition. Some wildlife habitats, including grasslands and meadows, depend on certain water levels. Draining the surrounding land for agricultural purposes can change the conditions they need to survive. This is a key reason for SSSIs not being in target condition, particularly on the Somerset Levels, and in the worst cases can result in complete loss of vulnerable habitats.



Bell heather, Tregargus Quarries SSSI, Cornwall. Paul Glendell/English Nature 24,846

The county picture

Just as there are obvious differences in the issues and problems facing the South West when compared to the other English regions, so are there differences within the region. For each county in the region the condition and key reasons why SSSIs are not in target condition can be summarised as follows:



Cornwall

(89.7% in target condition)

- Scrub encroachment and undergrazing on lowland moors and heaths
- Overgrazing on Bodmin Moor.
- Agricultural run-off and the spread of exotic species in woodlands.

Devon

(74.7% in target condition)

- Overgrazing and fires in the uplands, undergrazing in the lowlands
- Lack of scrub management on the coasts

Dorset

(70.3% in target condition)

- Lack of appropriate grazing and invasion of susceptible habitats by secondary woodland and scrub

Gloucestershire

(81.6% in target condition)

- Undergrazing of limestone grassland
- Deer browsing in woodland.

Somerset

(66% in target condition)

- Undergrazing
- Overgrazing
- Drainage (water level management)

Avon

(92.5% in target condition)

- Undergrazing and neglect

Wiltshire

(85.9% in target condition)

- Woodland management,
- Undergrazing of neutral and calcareous grassland.
- Diffuse pollution of rivers and streams

Early purple orchid, Barnsley Warren SSSI, Gloucestershire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 16,163

The road to 2010

At the end of 2005, we know that 77.5 per cent of the South West's SSSIs are in target condition. We also have a good understanding why the remaining 22.5 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 absolutely clear about what needs to be done, and by whom.

To tackle this critical step, English Nature established a Remedies Project in 2004 which has drawn together detailed information on every SSSI in the region. Each SSSI may be sub-divided into separate units, depending on habitat type and management of the site. For each unit in non-target condition, the project:

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



Figure 8 lists the five most important remedies that have been identified in the South West in terms of the area of SSSI that can be brought into target condition.

Figure 8 Remedies for bringing SSSIs into target condition in the South west – the top five (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)
Modify existing Environmentally Sensitive Area schemes	Defra Rural Development Service	Bogs	9,424
New/renew management Agreements	English Nature	Bogs, sand dunes and shingle	7,654
New Environmental Stewardship – Higher Level schemes	Defra Rural Development Service	Upland heath, bogs	7,352
Direct management	Forestry Commission, National Trust	Lowland heath, lowland broadleaved and yew woodland	5,407
Existing local project	Environment Agency	Lowland neutral grassland	4,448



Large-leaved lime, Lineover Wood SSSI, Gloucestershire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 17,533

Remedies in action

English Nature and Defra RDS have been successful in starting to tackle overgrazing on large parts of Bodmin Moor North SSSI. By co-ordinating their various regulatory powers and funding schemes, they have been able to support local farmers and Commons Associations in achieving more sustainable grazing levels, and dealing with localised problems such as gorse and bracken encroachment and damage by off-road vehicles.

English Nature has initiated habitat improvements on National Nature Reserve land that it manages on Goss Moor, thanks to EU LIFE funding through a partnership with the Highways Agency (responsible for shifting the A30 off the site), Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Butterfly Conservation and the Environment Agency. This has enabled large-scale scrub control, as well as introduction of grazing by traditional breeds in conjunction with local farmers.

Through clear prioritising of management action needed on the National Trust's coastal estate in Devon, many remedies have been achieved through direct management to introduce grazing and manage scrub encroachment.

Working together

As is clear from the preceding examples, an enormous amount of credit is due to the partner organisations and individuals whose efforts have led to the significant advance towards the 2010 target in the last two years. Without such close partnership working, we would be a lot further back than the current position. The continuation of this approach is essential if the target is to be achieved.

Figure 9, provides a summary of the area and condition of SSSI holdings for the major landowners in the region at the end of 2005.

Figure 9 Major landowners and the condition of their SSSIs in the South West at the end of 2005

Organisation	Total area (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (ha)	Area of SSSI in target condition (%)
MoD	25,817	22,308	86%
Crown Estate Marine	22,346	21,179	95%
National Trust	15,849	13,643	86%
English Nature	9,195	8,445	92%
Local Authorities	5,978	4,993	84%
Wildlife Trusts	5,601	4,970	89%
National Parks	5,024	1,768	35%
Forest Enterprise	3,284	1,628	50%
Environment Agency	2,675	2,494	93%
RSPB	2,322	1,806	78%
Water Companies	1,389	1,190	86%

Of all the partners that English Nature works with in the South West, a small number manage large areas of SSSIs. These partners are described as the Major Landowners Group and they have a particularly critical role to play in adopting remedies and bringing SSSIs into target.

This table shows the areas of land owned by each body. It does not necessarily reflect who is responsible for a SSSI not being in target condition. In many cases, there will be one or more reasons why the named land owner is not in a position to do anything about an SSSI not meeting the target condition. At the time of going to

press, English Nature is working to reach final agreement with our partners to identify, in such situations, which organisation is responsible for taking action. In the near future we will be able to show the area of SSSI holding for which the individual land holder has agreed responsibility.



Pewsey Downs SSSI, Wiltshire. Peter Wakely/English Nature 14,139

Why the PSA target is so important

The protection of SSSIs has long been considered essential to the conservation of England's wildlife habitats and natural features, but there is an increasing awareness of the wider value of these special sites. Firstly, by protecting particular habitats, many species, rare or otherwise, are conserved. Secondly, SSSIs perform many important 'ecosystem services' – upland moorlands that cleanse our water, saltmarshes that protect our coasts from rising seas, and wetlands with natural floodplains that buffer towns from flash flooding. Last but not least, SSSIs create social wealth, by offering people the simple enjoyment of a quiet walk in the countryside, and economic prosperity through the opportunities they provide for local and regional ecotourism.

Achieving the PSA target will be a contribution towards sustainable development, by ensuring that these benefits can be secured for future generations. It is clear that the biggest challenge ahead is to ensure that there is a continuing partnership approach, with truly co-ordinated action by key stakeholders. Despite the difficulties ahead, English Nature firmly believes the target is both realistic and achievable. However

this is only the case if we all co-operate to dedicate adequate resources to addressing the outstanding issues.

The responsibility for overseeing this process passes from English Nature to *Natural England* later this year. The creation of the new organisation has already begun, with English Nature, the Landscape, Access and Recreation remit of the Countryside Agency,

and the environment activities of Defra's Rural Development Service working together as partners. Since April 2005, this natural partnership has been working together to deliver joint outcomes and pave the way for *Natural England* whilst continuing to deliver their separate and respective statutory duties of each body. Achieving the PSA target will remain a vital area of work for the new organisation.





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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: Kelsey Head SSSI, Cornwall. Paul Glendell/
English Nature 25,512

Middle left: Speckled wood butterfly, Goss and Tregoss

Moors SSSI, Cornwall. Paul Glendell/English Nature 24,813

Bottom left: Rodborough Common SSSI, Gloucestershire.

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Main: Horner Water, North Exmoor SSSI, Somerset.

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