

A close look at SWT's most frequent claims in connection with their work at Knettishall

“We are only restoring it back to what it should be – open heath”

Our response:

1. Nature changes and evolves over time. The habitat at Knettishall has undergone some major changes. It only became heath in the first place because the woodland that existed before was cut down (human intervention No 1) and the use of the cleared land prevented any afforestation (human intervention No 2).
2. When human interventions stopped, trees were able to grow back in some areas, with the result being a uniquely varied mosaic of different habitats, where open areas were beautifully balanced with different types of woodland. The fact that these changes happened gradually and naturally contributed to the overall richness in wildlife
3. “Restoring back” is a euphemism for large scale destruction of an existing, established environment, namely mixed woodland. In order to try and re-establish a thriving heathland in its place, it is not enough to remove of all existing vegetation as well as the soil. Continuous clearing of the plants that will naturally try and recolonize the cleared areas will be required, as can be clearly seen at Knettishall, where we now have invasive weeds in abundance, with the Bracken posing a particular problem due to its increased vigor as a result of exposure to full sun. As a result, control over these unwanted plants is achieved with the use of chemical herbicides. The Bracken has been treated with Asulam, and the carpets of birch seedlings have been sprayed with Glyphosate.
4. Restoration work? No, it's deliberate destruction, followed by continuous working against nature instead of with it, with doubtful chance of success.

“We have so little of our heathland left, we need to try and increase the amount wherever we can.”

Our response:

Who says it's so little? We have, in the UK, about 95,000 ha of lowland heathland, which is a sub-variety of European dry heath, of which we have just under 900,000 ha. This is 15 % of all the European heathland. A high percentage for a semi natural habitat that only exists when continuously managed and is therefore completely man made. As the defined by the Forestry Commission: **“Its very creation owes itself to man and represents a way of life that has all but disappeared today.”** Exactly. That it is being talked about as threatened from extinction is a ludicrous claim: The only basis for its “threatened” status is the fact that its spread has diminished by comparison to the times when it was at its peak (and our woodland cover was at its absolute lowest with 7%). It existed in

much bigger areas simply as a result of the use of the land at that particular time. This does not, in itself, make it a threatened habitat nor does it make it one of particularly high environmental value. Of course, it has to be said that heathland will and should always be a part of our natural environment. But it would make much more sense to focus on preserving it where it exists to prevent further loss, which is a much more feasible endeavor, and to only increase it, sensibly, in areas where destruction of other important habitats (particularly woodland) can be kept to a minimum.

“The government with Natural England and all other NGOs agree it is important to create more heathland.”

Our response:

Our government has certainly been promoting and pushing for more heath creation since the early 90s. But why? The global UN Convention of Biodiversity in 92 marked the start of a transformation of our environmental policy. International pressures, agreements and guidelines have since become increasingly influential and have resulted not only in ambitious targets but also a much more streamlined and efficient, but also rigid and unquestioned strategy of how to fulfill them.

Lowland heath has been one of the habitats deemed to be of international importance. Our target for additional heath has been set to be 7,500 ha. This is on top of the target to restore our existing heath into a “recovering” or “favorable” state, which in itself usually means removal of woodland, like at Knettishall.

Where targets are to be achieved, the funding is huge. Organisations like the Wildlife Trusts have done particularly well out of this. They carry out the government’s targets and secure income as well as growth and influence. Naturally, these organizations will fall in line with the guidelines from above rather than question or criticize. Their own justification for existing depends on cooperation. It all works like clockwork – with targets set and the strategy for fulfillment in place, heath restorations have been carried out nationwide, leaving a trail of destruction, without anybody being able to put a stop to them and despite a wave of protest from the local public who are the only party to question the sense behind it all.

“We did consult with the public before our heath restoration project started”

Our response:

Sorry, but the “consultation”, held on 7th of September 2013 was a nothing but a sham.

SWT had at that point already secured funding of £223,000 by WREN plus £ 216,097 from the Higher Level Stewardship (payment of which had already started on 1st of September 2013) for their heath project. Their “vision for the

future” plan was therefore a done deal and nothing in it would have been altered by anything the public said.

But the planning actually goes much further back than the consultation date: SWT applied with the Heritage Lottery Fund in the summer 2011 for a grant, which was fast tracked because HLF “recognised the urgency of the project and entered SWT's application into the first available application round” (because it was a heath restoration). SWT only went public with their proposed plan of purchase after they had secured this deal (late 2011), and asked the gullible public to help them raise the additional 100,000 needed to buy Knettishall. They were able to buy Knettishall Heath because of their proposed heath project, but they did not make these plans known to anybody at that point, instead, when I enquired about their plans for Knettishall in early 2012, reassured me that they were not planning on bringing about any changes in how Knettishall would be managed, like for instance regarding access restrictions.

“Woodland can grow anywhere, but the heath can’t.”

Our response:

Woodland *could* grow in not all, but most places where nature is left in peace for long enough. But: There are hardly any such places in our country! The areas where heathland existed previously are among the very few where a natural regeneration of woodland can, and does, occur.

There is only a limited amount of those left as over time, most of our land has been developed or is used for agriculture today. It seems that within those areas, there is now a conflict of which habitat will prevail: Do we insist on “returning” them to heath wherever we can, or do we allow for the woodland to reclaim some of it?

In view of the fact that what became heath was woodland before, and that we only have so little woodland, why is this even a difficult question to answer? We ought to celebrate the fact that some of our woodland is trying to regenerate naturally, and not destroy it all over again.

“Our new enclosure means that there are less fences, a big improvement for visitors and walkers.”

Our response:

First of all, they have considerably enlarged the fenced off area (the New Enclosure), which now covers almost all of the previously open access Country Park. Access to this enclosure is now possible only at their chosen designated entry/exit points.

Secondly, while some fences were removed, other new fencing had to be put up, to connect the previously existing three smaller enclosures.

Thirdly, most of the fences that were removed ran alongside the roads, where they weren’t an issue for walkers, visually or practically. The new fencing however has been introduced in many places that were previously open, cutting

right across the trails, or running alongside them. Some of the previous access points have disappeared altogether.

An improvement? Sorry, but no. Apart from defining the area to be “restored” to open heath, the large enclosure is ultimately a step towards more control and restrictions on how the land is used by the public.

This is particularly relevant for those of you who walk their dog(s). As the people who have been visiting Knettishall by far the most for decades, a solution had to be found how to better control your walking patterns. “Heavy recreational use”, especially when this involves dogs, causes heath restorers a really big headache. At Knettishall they couldn’t just shut you out, so a different tactic was adopted, one of gradual “re-education”:

The larger enclosure where ponies roam freely all year round was a good starting point to introduce new rules to those who like to visit with their four legged friends: Keep to the tracks, keep your dog under control, keep your dog away from livestock, keep your dog on the lead. Or ideally: Stay outside the enclosure!

With the woodlands being turned into open heath, it is obviously considered a good strategy to get people used to the idea that it’s ALL a potentially highly sensitive ground nesting bird area and heaven forbid somebody’s dog might tread on a heather plant by mistake.

Take a look at the signage and you will find some giving a specific timeframe (1st March til 31 August) for when the dogs have to be on the lead. In other places however, there are already signs that just say “Dogs on leads” - without any specific dates. My guess: These signs will be gradually all we will see. Clever stuff – introducing changes in stages, so that nobody really notices them, and give them a positive spin so that the people will believe it’s actually an improvement. See also: “Solving dog disturbance at Knettishall” where you can read how further re-education will unfold, with the help of trained dog ambassadors on site.

http://www.share-withcare.org/assets/share-withcare_knettishall_heath_cs.pdf

“Our thinning of the woodland will provide an improved habitat for more general species”

Our response:

Random mechanical thinning as done by SWT results in only one thing, and this is weakening and even gradual death of the woodland. Sudden opening of the canopy causes a complete change of the forest microclimate, with changes of the flora and fauna as a result. Moisture levels decrease, and the soil gets dryer. The microorganisms in the soil suffer as a consequence, and the whole underground network of tree roots, microorganism and fungal rhizomes may not be able to cope, with dire consequences for the remaining trees as they depend on this underground network for food supplies and communication with other trees. The heavy logging equipment that has been used adds to the destruction underground by churning up and compacting the delicate structure of the woodland soil.

Increased exposure to wind results in tree loss by wind throw, as the trees inside a woodland have not developed deep enough roots. Dozens of mature trees have already been lost in addition to the ones that were cut as a result of this.

This is the kind of blanket statement that shows either that SWT does not have a clue what they are doing, or that they believe the public does not have a clue and blindly believe anything they are told.

SWT also claim they do their thinning in order to encourage the heath vegetation to take hold – which is much closer to the truth. It is not possible to have heath plants in a woodland environment, and the defined plan is to turn the land inside the enclosure to heath, so the thinning and glade cutting is carried out as a first step to eradicate the woodland. If additional trees to the ones being cut are lost, even better.

What exactly is meant by those more “general species” is anybody’s guess. What we have witnessed is a sharp decline in the woodland species, particularly birds. The (small) areas of woodland that will remain untouched by SWT lie outside the enclosure and will end up isolated and not able to support much wildlife.