

The Exmoor Society

The Year in Retrospect 2019-2020

The Year in Retrospect highlights the significant contributions and activities the Society has undertaken in order to achieve its charitable objective of promoting the conservation and protection of Exmoor National Park for the benefit of the public. However, this is an exceptional year. As late as February in the Spring Newsletter 2020 no.67 the Society, under the heading Looking Ahead, set out 6 priorities but did not foresee the devastating impact of a world-wide Covid-19 pandemic, leading to the shutdown of all activity in the UK. For the Society it meant closing the shop, resource centre, offices only accessed by staff, separately on two different days and otherwise working from home. Trustees have also been active by email, Zoom meetings with the Officers keeping in regular contact for day to day decisions. The Year in Retrospect is limited because of cancelling many events that help the Society to fully achieve its overall charitable objective.

Highlights of the Year

- Delighted that the Landscapes Review into National Parks recommended many points made by the Society.
- Highlighted fully in the Landscapes Review was the Society's report "Towards a Register of Exmoor's Natural Capital"
- Published "Saving the Splendour" in July with good press coverage.
- Increased corporate membership including some Parish and Town Councils.
- Involved in nature recovery in partnership with Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA), Exmoor Mires, Plantlife, Headwaters of the Exe and National Trust
- Helped the ENPA receive status of The Queen's Commonwealth Canopy Woodland for Hawkridge Woods, the first in England National Parks
- Responded to Coronavirus by supporting Exmoor Hill Farming Network (EHFN) and increasing the Pinnacle Award for young entrepreneurs to £5000. Helped other groups achieve emergency funding e.g. food bank, medical support and EHFN.
- Commissioned a successful membership survey.

The Society promotes the conservation of Exmoor for the benefit of all in a variety of ways: through conferences, issuing statements, influencing local and national policy, undertaking research, using its website and social media, undertaking outreach and engagement, making awards and monitoring planning.

Conserving & Campaigning

The Society explores the evidence before campaigning on issues and hot topics.

Natural Capital: The recommendation of '*Towards a Register of Exmoor's Natural Capital*' in the Landscapes Review is a major achievement as it reported that it breaks new ground in four ways (see Spring Newsletter 2020).

Landscapes Review: The Society supported many of the recommendations including a stronger national body called a National Landscape Service, changes to the size and direction of Boards at Park level, emphasis on nature recovery, new agri-environmental schemes, and access for educational groups. Already the Campaign for National Parks has raised issues over governance, socio-economic duty becoming a third purpose, diversity in access and the balance between access and conservation. We agree with CNP over their concerns particularly if the proposed national body leads to over-centralisation and little local flexibility.

Test and Trials: The government is to introduce a new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) and is using a series of Tests and Trials over England, one of which includes Exmoor. Called Exmoor's Ambition, it is based on the Society's Register of Natural Capital and further details can be found in the 2020 Spring Newsletter.

Nature Recovery: Recognising that there are many bodies engaged in nature recovery, the Society is working in partnership with ENPA and its "visioning" exercises on future land use. Other bodies include the Exmoor Mires project, Headwaters of the Exe, National Trust, Somerset Wildlife Trust. We are a partner with Plantlife on a project to conserve rare lichens, mosses and liverworts. In the Resource Centre, Plantlife has provided lichen specimens, microscopes, pamphlets and books to identify and study lower plant communities and encourage citizen science. Further details are in the 2020 Spring Newsletter. We are developing our own project on Nocturnal Exmoor.

Climate Change: The Society has for many years referred to the climate crisis as the most long-term threat facing the natural environment and the need for management adaptation. We had aimed to do more by including a climate change scientist from the Meteorological Office in the cancelled 2020 Spring Conference

(see his paper in the next *Exmoor Review*). The Society is considering its own activities facing the challenge of carbon reduction.

Government Consultations: The Society responded to two consultations; one on the Exmoor Coastal Path, the other on England's Tree Strategy.

Planning

The Society has been very active this year in raising concerns over some applications and objecting to others, particularly where we have judged that there will be significant harm to the landscape character and visual amenity. There has been an increase in retrospective planning applications which has led to the Society objecting to more planning applications than usual. Although it is essential for good rural broadband, we would hope to minimise the impact on scenic beauty and landscape character by a national strategic approach that asks telecoms companies and emergency services to propose and give notice of the whole network so that a few intrusive masts can be identified rather than through individual planning applications when it is too late.

Events & Outreach

- The annual Spring Conference in partnership with Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) aims to promote discussion on issues of importance that affect the national park purposes. The theme for 2020 was Exmoor's Coast with emphasis on developing resilience to climate change. Unfortunately, the conference had to be cancelled.
- Education: We continue to find ways to help schools to get their children out of the classroom to experience Exmoor for themselves. Again, we have had to curtail most of the activities planned.
- Walks: The Society provided an extensive walks programme, in different locations and on diverse themes, led by knowledgeable guides. Most of an exciting programme for 2020 has had to be cancelled.
- The Resource Centre continues all its work. For example, new archive material from the estate of Victor Bonham Carter has been received and stored in the archive while cataloguing it in detail. The archive has been rearranged to make it easier for researchers to find specific items and to maximise space available for future archive material. Requests to access the archive have increased, also demand for presentations on the work of the Resource Centre. Closure of it through the lockdown and now reduced to access by appointment only has slowed down its activities.

Awards & Competitions

This year's winners are as follows:

- Founder's Award – Caroline Tonson Rye
- Brian & Mary Chugg Conservation Award – Graze The Moor Steering Group
- Adult Poetry Competition – 1st: Terry Dyson; 2nd: Jan Martin; 3rd: Richard Westcott
- MacEwen Essay Competition – 1st: Michelle Werrett

Governance

Finance (taken from the accounts for the year ended 31 May 2020):

Total incoming resources for 2020 amount to £67,367. The income on the general fund of £48,528 is close to expectations and the restricted/designated fund income of £19,109 is mainly from bequests. Total resources expended amount to £70,094. General fund expenditure has been well controlled and after transfers resulted in a surplus of £282. Expenditure on Restricted & Designated funds totalled £16,907 and this has mainly been spent on production of the book, grants – in particular the Pinnacle Award - expenditure on the Big Picnic and continuing to employ a part-time Development Co-ordinator. The valuation of investments has increased this year by £18,076, which increases the net movement of funds on the General Fund to £18,358.

The return on the COIF investments and the deposit accounts have remained stable during the year.

Executive:

- The overall strategic aims are Campaign, Conserve and Engage. Trustees decided on six priorities, see 2020 Spring Newsletter for more detail;
- The Development Co-ordinator increased the Corporate membership including Parish and Town Councils. A membership survey was undertaken and the results are in the 2020 Spring Newsletter;
- We continue to work in partnership with others including ENPA, the Campaign for National Parks, the Campaign to Protect Rural England, Southwest Water, the National Trust and local groups;
- Trustees acted quickly to the coronavirus emergency and held the April, June and August Executive meetings by Zoom.