

The Exmoor Society and Game Shooting

Update 2021

Background: In 2018, the Exmoor Society responded to an invitation from the Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) to give its views on game shooting. The context was “increased discussion about the impact of game shooting on Exmoor, via our Partnership Plan public consultation and also via comments made by our Local Access Forum, Authority Members and local community. Our recently published Landscape Character Assessment has also revealed some concerns about the developing impact of game shoots.” Also, “It asserts the importance of engaging with the issues in order to achieve the Authority’s duty to protect the special qualities of the National Park and hopes there are long term benefits to the shoot industry to be gained from looking at this with the Authority.”

Exmoor Society’s role: The above quotations are from the final Exmoor Society report, available on the website.¹ Recognising that different interests may conflict, the Society aims to fulfil the following purposes:

- objectively to accumulate information relating to the legal activity of game shooting (on Exmoor, mainly pheasants),
- to reflect on the direct consequences, positive and negative, and their broader implications,
- to draw unprejudiced conclusions,
- to disseminate findings to Exmoor interested parties and the wider public,
- thereby potentially to help promote understanding and assist the resolution of problems by provision of independent review and comment.

Progress to date: The 2018 Exmoor Society report was favourably received, but so far actions arising from its recommendations have been limited. The Covid-19 pandemic inevitably is detrimental to progress by complicating people’s ability to work, communicate, and undertake action if needed. Two issues stand out.

1. Effects of pheasant shooting on local communities

Two Exmoor settlements have been sources for communications with the Exmoor Society about detrimental effects of pheasant shooting practices on their communities. These include familiar complaints about noise from bird scarers and discharge of guns, temporary closure of public rights of way, smell pollution from bird rearing, landscape changes, and by shooting groups alleged not to have observed requirements of Covid lockdown. Most frequently of all, however, is that questions repeatedly are asked about what planning law allows in relation to game management, and particularly in the construction of associated physical infrastructure.

2. Limitations on National Park Authority (ENPA) action

Exmoor NPA has limited financial and other resources to allocate across its many and diverse responsibilities. Still, there has been a perception by some that the Authority has shown insufficient urgency in addressing the problems noted above in the light of the statutory obligations for all National Parks. On one hand, some critics believe that large scale shoot interests may have been indulged at cost to the quality of life for other people living in the national park. On the other, it is conceded that substantial financial costs are incurred when seeking advice aimed at clarifying the legal situation regarding rights, obligations, and decisions on planning applications for shoots infrastructure.

¹ <https://www.exmoorsociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Exmoor-Society-Perspectives-on-Game-Shooting-Dec-2018.pdf>

Exmoor Society's opinion: The complaints noted above, repeatedly made, apply to two localities and may be unrepresentative for Exmoor as a whole. Certainly, there is no evidence of problems elsewhere. However, the Exmoor Society is concerned that unless complaints are addressed to the satisfaction of the aggrieved parties focus may shift towards outright opposition to game shooting. Currently, complainants accept that game shooting is a legal activity and, although individual opinions vary, it is not widely opposed on other grounds. The activity has long been part of the social, cultural, and economic fabric of Exmoor. Yet its continuing acceptance on Exmoor may depend on the universal good conduct of shoots and their demonstrated respect for the legitimate needs and expectations of others. Insensitive or self-concerned behaviour of a small minority can serve to mobilise opposition to the disadvantage of all.

Regarding legal complexities, the Exmoor Society will strongly support ENPA efforts to obtain clarification of rights and responsibilities as they affect all parties. The current situation of ongoing confusion and uncertainty is conducive only to aggravating misunderstandings and sources of conflict. These problems need to be resolved.

New considerations: Since 2018, the context for game shooting in Exmoor (and elsewhere) has changed radically in response to national policies both enacted and in prospect.

1. National policy for agriculture and the environment

The Agriculture Act 2020 and Environment Bill 2021 change the character and objectives for farming and the wider rural environment. These embody intentions set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan, complemented for protected areas by what emerges (now expected late 2021) from government's response to the Landscapes Review (Glover Report), and incorporating outcomes from work by the Natural Capital Committee and recommendations of the Dasgupta Review. The terms natural capital, ecosystem services, nature recovery, rewilding, and biodiversity have all entered the modern lexicon of national policies that will affect Exmoor for many years. Game shooting will not be immune from the consequences of new national purposes and uses for the countryside environment, its inhabitants, visitors, and resources.

2. Consequences of Covid-19

The consequences of Covid-19 will be felt for a long time. There are real concerns about the social and economic implications for Exmoor communities, reinforcing uncertainties about the impacts of radical policy changes. New emphasis on the benefits accruing to people's physical and mental health from their exposure to natural environments - such as are found in our National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty - mesh with the evolving 'One Health' concept linking human, animal, and environmental health. Where scope for changing lifestyles and work practices permit, more people currently seek to relocate from urban to desirable rural areas such as Exmoor. Those not so privileged can be expected to visit in greater numbers. All these changes can be expected to have profound implications for how different groups of people live and work within the National Park, their sources of income and livelihood.

New national policy directions and Covid's consequences suggest that the implications for Exmoor game shooting should continue to be monitored and issues addressed, if any arise. These may include concerns about its contribution to employment and livelihoods in the local economy, ecology with a particular focus on biodiversity, nature recovery and rewilding, recreational activities, and the cultural attributes of the unique and precious place which is Exmoor National Park. Negotiation built on good communication and mutual respect is the best means to achieve consensus that accommodates the needs, wants and expectations of Exmoor residents and visitors alike. Among others engaged in that important task, the Exmoor Society will continue to play its part by reflection and comment on developments as and when they occur.