

Wild red grouse  
unique to the UK



Treasured moorland'



Blocked drainage ditch  
full of sphagnum

# Briefing Note – Grouse Moors and Flooding

## Background

An article by George Monbiot in The Guardian on the 29th December claimed that grouse moor management contributed to the flooding in Northern England. Monbiot claimed that moors were being drained to produce more grouse. This claim has been repeated in the press and parliament.

This note sets out the facts. Contrary to Monbiot's claims, good moorland management can help to prevent flooding by blocking drains, restoring areas of bare peat and reintroducing sphagnum mosses, although the flood mitigation effects are limited. Far from seeking to create drier moors, managers appreciate that on a grouse moor "wetter is better".

## The Moorland Association

The members of the Moorland Association manage 1 million acres of the uplands of Northern England and Wales. It is the management of these 'priority' habitats for driven wild red grouse shooting that helps protect these designated landscapes rather than see them lost to afforestation, severe overgrazing, devastating wildfires, neglect or windfarms.

## New Approach

Since 2014, the Moorland Association has helped spearhead a new approach to upland management on areas of deep peat that its members manage focusing on the outcomes we wish to see that benefit us all. These include:

- carbon storage and capture
- improved biodiversity
- improved water quality
- slowed water run-off
- wildfire mitigation
- driven grouse shooting
- economic stock grazing

Through a series of site visits, key stakeholders have agreed that 'fixing the peat' will deliver a raft of the above benefits on peat soils greater than 40cm in depth known as blanket bog. The best ways to do this are:

- Raise the water table by blocking historical drainage ditches incentivised by agricultural policy to improve grazing, i.e. re-wet the moors.
- Re-vegetate bare peat caused primarily by historical atmospheric pollution, wildfires and erosion.
- Re-introduce peat forming Sphagnum mosses through innovative techniques where they have been lost.

## Restoration in Progress

A vast amount of work has already been completed on grouse moors over the last decade. In the North Pennines AONB alone, 120 Ha of bare peat has been re-vegetated and 4,370 km of drainage ditches have been blocked. The figures across the 400,000 acres of deep peat that Moorland Association members look after are much higher and are currently being collated by Natural England, along with mapping of restoration that still needs to be done.

The consensus reached by stakeholders has driven the Blanket Bog Restoration Strategy led by Defra's Upland Stakeholder Forum and work continues with the Uplands Management Group to turn this strategy into further tangible action on the ground.

It is not the aim of grouse moor managers to 'dry the peat to increase the grouse population' or to 'burn the peat'. Peat is the basic building block supporting the habitat for red grouse and other key moorland birds. Careful burning and mowing leaving any existing moss layer intact helps protect against wildfires and creates a patchwork of plant diversity and varied vegetation heights important for all ground nesting birds. Removing the canopy of over-dominant vegetation can be an important preparation step for sphagnum inoculation and the limited techniques available to achieve this need to remain in the 'tool kit'.

## Wetter is Better

Grouse moor managers appreciate that 'wetter is better' building resilience into their land adding protection from climate change and increasing risk of wildfire. They appreciate that Sphagnum moss is the king of blanket bog habitats, improves water quality, flow and carbon capture and are actively engaged in trailing techniques for its recovery on their land.

## Flood mitigation

Areas of bare, eroding peat is the worst case scenario for flashy run off from moorland, but even when stabilised and re-vegetated Defra's latest data shows that flood attenuation achieved is less than 10% equating to a holding back of the water by 20 minutes. (Making Space for Water).

"The Moorland Association is fully engaged with doing all that can be done through consensus and innovation to help flood alleviation, but even with every inch restored to active blanket bog, (which may or may not be possible and will take a long time) the help this will add to the needed suite of flood mitigation in the North of England is limited."

*Amanda Anderson, Director Jan 2016.*

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