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Action Plan for the Reed and Sedge Cutting Industry



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Aim

The Broads will have a thriving and sustainable reed and sedge cutting industry (RSCI), recognising the multiple benefits it brings to the Broads.

The purpose of this reed and sedge cutting industry (RSCI) Action Plan is to set the focus for achieving the necessary conditions for a sustainable reed and sedge cutting industry in the Broads. The Plan recognises the ecosystems benefits the industry provides for:

- Model for low carbon management of wetlands
- Biodiversity
- Landscape character
- Land management and protection
- Cultural heritage
- Local economy
- Local employment

Background

Fen management in the Broads has changed considerably since the early 1900s, when local labour and products dominated markets; now, only areas of high quality thatching reed and sedge are managed commercially by a small group of experienced reed and sedge cutters. Despite its reduction in size, however, the industry retains its importance and is showing signs of a revival. As well as providing the means to earn a living, the cutters are helping to preserve and protect our cultural heritage and contributing to the maintenance of the internationally important landscape and biodiversity of the Broads.

A study of the Broads reed and sedge cutting industry in 2002¹ found that the main reasons for its decline in the late 20th century were:

- income not being sufficient to live on;
- existing machines for cutting being old and expensive to replace;
- access to and on reedbeds difficult (for moving/transporting reed);
- insufficient places to offload and stack reed such that it could be loaded onto road transport;
- lack of road transport suitable for carrying reed (and expertise on loading);
- imported reed keeping prices down;
- landowners not passing on ESA fen tier payments for management of reedbeds (although this point is not agreed on by all parties); and
- difficulties of attracting apprentices into the industry.

Some historic factors attributed to poor quality issues, including cutting of sub-standard reed and poor storage techniques, have been addressed by the Broads Reed and Sedge Cutters Association (Brasca) through improved working methods. There was also a greater tolerance for poorer quality reed in the past, with a diversity of markets for thatching, for example, outbuildings. Increasing

¹ Ash J. (2002) Feasibility of rejuvenating the reed and sedge industry. Broads Authority report

nutrients in the wetland ecosystem can affect marginal reedswamp quality²; however there is no evidence to suggest that there is any direct impact on commercial quality reed.

A significant and current factor for the lower overall reed production is the loss of traditional wetland management to conservation management (longer rotational cutting and burning), which has resulted in a decrease in the amount of good thatching-quality reed.

A number of reasons have been attributed to poor quality Norfolk reed in the past decades, and an increase in foreign imports of reed; however, this is no longer the case, and the quality of local reed is better than that of some imported reed, supporting the increase demand for local reed. The last recalculation by the National Society Master Thatchers in 2006 (based on the number of properties members were thatching each year and using a rough calculation of 80-100 bundles per square³ to achieve a depth of thatch of 12inches), showed the level of UK produced reed had risen slightly to 25% of the total, to satisfy a total demand of around 2 million bundles. Brasca Members estimate that the current reed production in the Broads Area to be approximately 50,000 bundles (Oct.2011).

Numerous initiatives have resulted from the publication of the 2002 industry study. These include organisations focusing on offering contracts to cutters in accordance with contractual process, Broads Authority and Leader+ grants including purchasing and loaning machinery, and a HLF bursary scheme for skills training. These projects have been reasonably effective at addressing some of the issues outlined above. A key catalyst for further action by the cutters has been the formation of an independent association, the Broads Reed & Sedge Cutters Association (Brasca). All these initiatives have added to our understanding of the issues and any new actions will build on this learning.

Improving the quantity and quality of commercial reed remains a central aim for the industry, whilst protecting the special qualities of the Broads. The successful achievement of this aim will involve an ongoing focus on:

- Increasing the quantity and satisfy the UK thatching industry market demand in accordance to landowners wishes, guided by the Fen Audit and ecological information;
- Developing a quality assurance scheme that involves the majority of thatchers;
- Addressing site access constraints; and
- Finding the right balance of water regimes that allow for cutting and ecological requirements to be met.

² Boar, R. (1992) Factors affecting the growth of *Phragmites australis*. Reedbeds for Wildlife.

³ The measurement of the square is a traditional one for thatching and is calculated on the rough basis of 80 – 100 bundles achieving a thatch depth of 12in (300mm). Bundle size will vary depending on the production source. Thatchers measure their work in “squares”. 1 square = 100sq ft (9.3sq m.) It is still acceptable to quote the measurements only in imperial measure.

Delivering the Action Plan

The RSCI Action Plan contributes to the delivery of the Broads Plan, the strategic management plan for the Broads. It sets out key objectives and actions, with identified delivery partners and timescales.

Partners involved in delivering the action plan include: Land managers/owners; Broads Reed and Sedge Cutters Association; British Reed Growers Association, Broads Authority, Norfolk Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Natural England; National Society Master Thatchers; Anglian Master Thatchers Association; and the Environment Agency.

This plan will be maintained by the Broads Authority and a rolling review every two years prompted by email consultation or meetings with signatories as suggested by responses gained.

Consultees and those in support of the Plan

Broads Reed and Sedge Cutters Association
British Reed Growers Association
Broads Authority
Norfolk Wildlife Trust
RSPB
Natural England
National Society Master Thatchers
East Anglian Master Thatchers Association
Environment Agency

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Action plan

Overarching issue	What this means – why is there an issue, what does it result in?	How can we address this?	Who would address it	timescale
Employment conditions	Low wages fail to keep people/attract new people to industry (associated problems for affordable housing, transport etc).	Offer permanent and contract employment, where possible, to cutters out of season to carry out conservation cutting, scrub clearance activities and other relevant contracts.	Land managers/ owners	Ongoing
	Skills training – including cutting and other land management skills. Some issue with retaining cutters when commercial work is very seasonally dependant, wider skills are useful for providing an income when no cutting work can take place.	Provide opportunity, where possible, for in-house training for new cutters.	Land managers/ owners	Ongoing
	Difficult to buy/replace necessary equipment.	Maintain (and seek to expand) equipment loan scheme.	Brasca	Ongoing
Local economy and marketing	Brasca, and North Norfolk Cutters Assoc. promotes local reed through their joint website, however local produce is not sufficient to meet demand. Imported reed can reduce local prices. Create new markets for poorer quality reed products to expand the area that could be managed commercially.	Investigate opportunities for developing Norfolk reed as a brand that commands higher market value. Investigate opportunities for creating new markets for poorer quality reed (e.g. Environment Agency river bank erosion works and adder banks/shelters).	Brasca/Cutters, BA	Ongoing

Fen access and storage/transport of product	Some sites have issues with access and moving/transporting reed.	Land managers and cutters to identify issues and create better, and easier access for site management by cutters.	Reedcutters to identify issues Land managers/owners to provide access	2011/12
Landowner constraints	HLS/Fen tier and other grant payments received by landowners not shared with cutters and, on some sites, cutters having to pay royalties to harvest reed and sedge.	Remove royalty payments.	Land managers/owners	Site specific opportunities
	Some wetland management can lead to management issues for cutters.	Planning conservation management closely with cutters via management planning to avoid conflict (e.g. as set out in the Broads Authority procedure for site selection and assessment of the fen harvester).	Land managers/owners	Ongoing
Legislation constraints	Protected species and ecological condition of the Broads need to be protected.	Design work to not affect protected species, such as Bittern.	NE, Cutters, Land managers/owners	Ongoing
Quality and quantity of habitat for reed growing	Water regimes (flow and level) not suitable for commercial quality reed growth and harvesting.	Consider the options on a site by site basis.	Land managers/owners, NE, BA, EA	Ongoing
	Areas of potential commercial reedbed remain uncropped.	Create commercial reed cutting and appropriate water management regimes in 50% of the newly created reedbed areas in Norfolk.	Land managers/owners	Ongoing
	Commercial reed harvest prone to occasional failure (e.g. bent stems).	Identify sites / areas suitable for restoration subject to national vegetation classification to return to traditional sustainable	Brasca/Cutters, BA	2011/12

		management (commercial cutting) and/or part commercial cutting. Cutters to work with landowners to agree and map new areas for commercial restoration – potential SDF/BA contract.		
		Establish, through updating fen Audit, the areas of reed managed to produce thatching quality reed and mixed fen under long rotation conservation cutting.	BA, NE	Ongoing
		Expand restoration of commercial reed where appropriate. Target 5 to 10 hectares of reed habitat restoration per year for the next 5 years subject to funding availability.	Land managers/ owners	Ongoing Annual target
		Provide assistance to cutters during times of failure of reed harvest.	Land managers/ owners	Ongoing
Quality and quantity of reed product	Information on levels and impacts of residual nitrogen in terms of reed performance exists ⁴ . It can encourage rapid stem growth and thinner stem walls. From the current evidence it appears unlikely that nitrogen	Take a precautionary approach with site management to reduce nutrient levels as far as is possible.	BA, NE, NWT, RSPB	Ongoing

⁴ Haslam S.M., (2010) A Book of Reed, Published by the Forest Press

	levels in reed are affecting quality significantly ⁵ .			
	The demand for European for water reed in new build is exceeding European supply and is having a direct impact on the quality of reed imported to the UK. Currently the UK has considerably more information about the quality of reed compared to importing countries.	Set up an agreed and endorsed quality assurance scheme for commercial reed for use by thatchers. This scheme should focus on reed strength as other quality measures (length, width, density) determine the end use by the thatcher and value to the cutter.	Thatchers, Brasca	2013
	Support cutters as set out in this plan.		All	Ongoing
Communication and industry vitality	Joint working with the range of interest groups to promote progress, challenges and solutions where relevant. To include discussing and where relevant marketing a wider range of products and skills including outlets for non-thatching quality reed such as biofuel and cutters as wetland contractors.	Develop and retain channels of communication that contribute to the forward development of the cutting industry.	All	Ongoing

⁵ S.M. Haslam, John Letts (pers comm)

Conclusion

It would be fair to report that the decline of the reed and sedge cutting industry in the Broads has been ceased. There has been a slow recovery; however, on some sites this recovery is very finely balanced. This Plan sets out some of the issues that remain as a threat to commercial management and how the continued support of landowners and conservation organisations can be focused. The Broads reed and sedge cutters (Brasca) continue to provide the focus for the future of their industry, including attracting new cutters in the Broads.

Reed and sedge cutting has a long history and proven work practices and methods have served well for generations of people and wildlife. With good practice for wildlife and open decision making that affects the industry's economic recovery and social welfare, commercial cutting provides a significant contribution to open fen management. However the Fen Management Strategy identifies that it is not achieving its potential in the Broads. Currently 12% of open fen is commercial with an additional 11% of open fen identified as having potential for commercial sustainable management. The Broads cutting industry relies on strong partnerships with cutters, land managers and conservation organisations willing to facilitate restoration of previously commercial sites and to create new reedbeds for commercial management.

This plan sets out some ways that may secure commercial reed and sedge cutting in the Broads. Through discussion the Plan and actions will develop.

References

- Boar, R. (1992) Factors affecting the growth of *Phragmites australis*. Reedbeds for Wildlife.
- Haslam S.M., (2009) The Reed, Published by the British Reed Growers Association
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- Stephenson, S. (2004) A Supplement to the Fen Management Strategy, incorporating the Fen Audit. Published by the Broads Authority