

Broads Reed and Sedge Cutting Association
Report by Richard Starling (Chairman of BRASCA)

Summary: This report is a status update compiled by the Broads Reed & Sedge Cutters Association (Brasca). Members' comments are sought on the main issues and problems facing reed and sedge cutting in the Broads. A final report will be produced by Brasca and forwarded to Defra.

1 Background

- 1.1 Considerable progress and success have been achieved in the rejuvenation of reed and sedge cutting through the close working partnership between Brasca and the Broads Authority over the last ten years. Approximately 12 % of the present open fen area of 1,914 hectares is being sustainably managed by Brasca members to produce reed and sedge for thatching. The Authority has in place a Reed & Sedge Action Plan which is supported by Brasca.
- 1.2 The Authority assists Brasca with the training costs for new entrants (chainsaw, brush cutter, use of herbicides, boat handling and first aid) to enable individuals to obtain additional work opportunities e.g. scrub removal during non harvesting times.
- 1.3 The expansion of both reed and sedge habitat restoration has been carried out with the financial support of the Authority (50 hectares since 2004). A minority of cutters receive some income from individual landowners who provide additional work opportunities funded with income generated by HLS schemes. The majority of reed cutters do not receive any additional income and a minority still pay landowners royalty payments.
- 1.4. Reed and sedge cutting remains the only true sustainable management method of managing the Broads reed and sedge habitat. It is also cost effective when compared to other methods of management and provides traditional work opportunities for a limited number of local people. There are wider benefits including maintaining an open landscape and providing sustainable materials for roofs (thatching).
- 1.5. Funding is prioritised for new entrants to enable them to have sufficient areas of reed and sedge to provide an income. Three new entrants have joined Brasca over the last three years and a further new entrant is planned for this summer to work with existing cutters.

2 Main Issues and Concerns

2.1 Brasca considers that further expansion in the sustainable management of the Broads is only possible if and when certain practices are changed which are currently having a detrimental effect on existing and future harvesting operations. The following is a list of the main points which need addressing:

a) **Widening of traditional dykes**

Many reed bed dykes have been widened and deepened which produces larger spoil banks. These dykes and wider spoil banks have resulted in the loss of many acres of important reed bed and fen habitat over the years. The relatively extensive spoil banks provide increased area for rapid scrub establishment. Many cubic metres of peat are excavated in dyke widening operations and CO₂ is released as this peat dries out (estimated at 100kgs of carbon per m³ of peat).

b. **Water Flow**

It has become difficult in some locations to get dykes cleaned out for a variety of reasons but mainly consent from Natural England, water quality concerns that certain plants may be effected by river/broad water entering sites, poor operation of sluices and lack of foot drain (grup) maintenance. Without adequate water flow, stagnation rapidly takes place especially during the warmer and drier summer months.

c. **Water Quality**

Brasca has complete confidence in the Environment Agency's monitoring of the Broads water quality, however, some bodies have used poor water quality as a reason not to clean out dykes or adopt a natural free flow of water on and off some sites.

There appears to be misunderstanding of EA's water quality findings by some people. To avoid this, Brasca suggested that EA adopt an annual water quality report for each catchment with a simpler and easier understood methodology. This combined with a similar aquatic plant report should improve public understanding and avoid the present confusion. The Environment Agency have, in principal, accepted Brasca's proposal.

d. **New Reed beds**

There appears to be no thought given to any future sustainable management when these sites are designed. The main emphasis appears to be 'deep water' sites with reed cover and designed for the questionable needs of one single bird species ie bittern. Constructed at considerable cost and with high carbon footprints using public money (eg Candle Dyke project by the Environment Agency) these sites will require public funding through various schemes such as Higher Level Stewardship for future maintenance.

Brasca suggests that all reed bed creation projects should have a sustainability clause which requires that 50% of the area be designed to

produce and able to harvest thatching quality reed. In addition each of these projects should have projected carbon footprint calculations which include fuel used during construction, carbon released from excavated peat during construction and the projected carbon footprint of future management of the site.

e. **Fen Audit**

The Broads Authority's audit monitors and records the condition of the areas fens and reed beds including those areas which are under sustainable traditional management. Brasca requests that the audit further includes a "sustainable report" of each site ie what percentage is being managed by sustainable means. As with the creation of new reed beds, Brasca considers that all sites, if possible, should have 50% of their reed bed area managed on a sustainable basis.

f. **Yare Barrier**

Some members of the Broads Forum have previously supported the provision of a Yare Barrier to protect the area from devastating North Sea surge tide events and the Forum has been universal in its wish to maintain the Broads as a predominantly fresh water habit for as long as possible.

There appears to be little or no further discussions or actions on this major long term concern. Brasca requests that, given the current emphasis on producing a climate change adaptation plan, the Authority should hold open discussions with District Councils, the Environment Agency and interested parties as a matter of urgency to focus on the long term flood protection for the Great Yarmouth area and The Broads.

g. **Housing**

Most of the younger reed cutters have no choice but to live outside the Broads area and commute to work mainly from Norwich, Great Yarmouth or Lowestoft. Some are content with this arrangement but others are far from happy with the current situation. We estimate that in 20 years, few, if any working reed cutters will reside in the Broads owing to the housing problem.

A rethink of the current housing provision situation is needed if many of the smaller Broads villages are to thrive with instead of without a younger generation. Currently, the only real option for the younger new entrants into reed cutting is a 'live aboard'.

Author: Richard Starling

Date of report: 13 June 2014

Broads Plan Objectives: AL3.2

Appendices: None