

Fact check: A Response to inaccurate and incorrect assertions in Dartmoor Nature Alliance's Claim of Fake News - Blog 17 June

Ponies not included in agri-environment contract stocking calendars

Under Environmentally Sensitive Area agri-environment schemes (launched on Dartmoor early-mid 1990s), a grazing density across all Dartmoor commons outside of the scheme stocking calendar was allotted for semi-wild ponies.

Dartmoor Commons are currently contracted to the subsequent scheme contract, Higher Level Stewardship.

When Higher Level Stewardship agreements were launched and first negotiated on Dartmoor Commons, many kept the allotted area for ponies outside of stocking calendars.

The Higher Level Stewardship contracts across Dartmoor commons were due to end at the beginning of the 2020s. To allow the Independent Review into Protected sites on Dartmoor (Dartmoor Review) to report (late 2023) and the work of the subsequently appointed Dartmoor Land Use Management Group (DLUMG) to start (due to report late 2027) Natural England rolled Higher Level Stewardship agreements on. The majority of commons are therefore currently in Higher Level Stewardship contracts.

It is in Natural England's gift to extend the Higher Level Stewardship contracts in line with the completion date of the Dartmoor Land Use Management Group's report on how to implement the Dartmoor Review recommendations. This would show respect for the work of the Land Use Management Group by Natural England.

Most Dartmoor Commons still operate a grazing density outside of scheme stocking calendars in which semi-wild ponies run. Any ponies over and above this density would be included in the contract stocking calendars.

It is not false that ponies are being added to stocking calendars for the first time. In misinterpreting grazing data from only one common, and one so different to the majority of Manorial commons as Dartmoor Forest, flaws have been introduced into the Dartmoor Nature Alliance's argument. *Aside: Forest is not a reference to trees, it has developed linguistically from the latin name of Forris (hunting ground, or chase).*

A lose-lose deal for the semi-wild ponies

If a Dartmoor common has put ponies inside their Higher Level Stewardship stocking calendar, ponies are included in the overall 56-89% grazing density reduction required to move to Countryside Stewardship.

	HLS		CS tier 1	CS tier 2	CS tier 3
Overall Grazing Density (lsu/ha)	0.36		0.16	0.08	0.04
Overall reduction in livestock required			56%	78%	89%

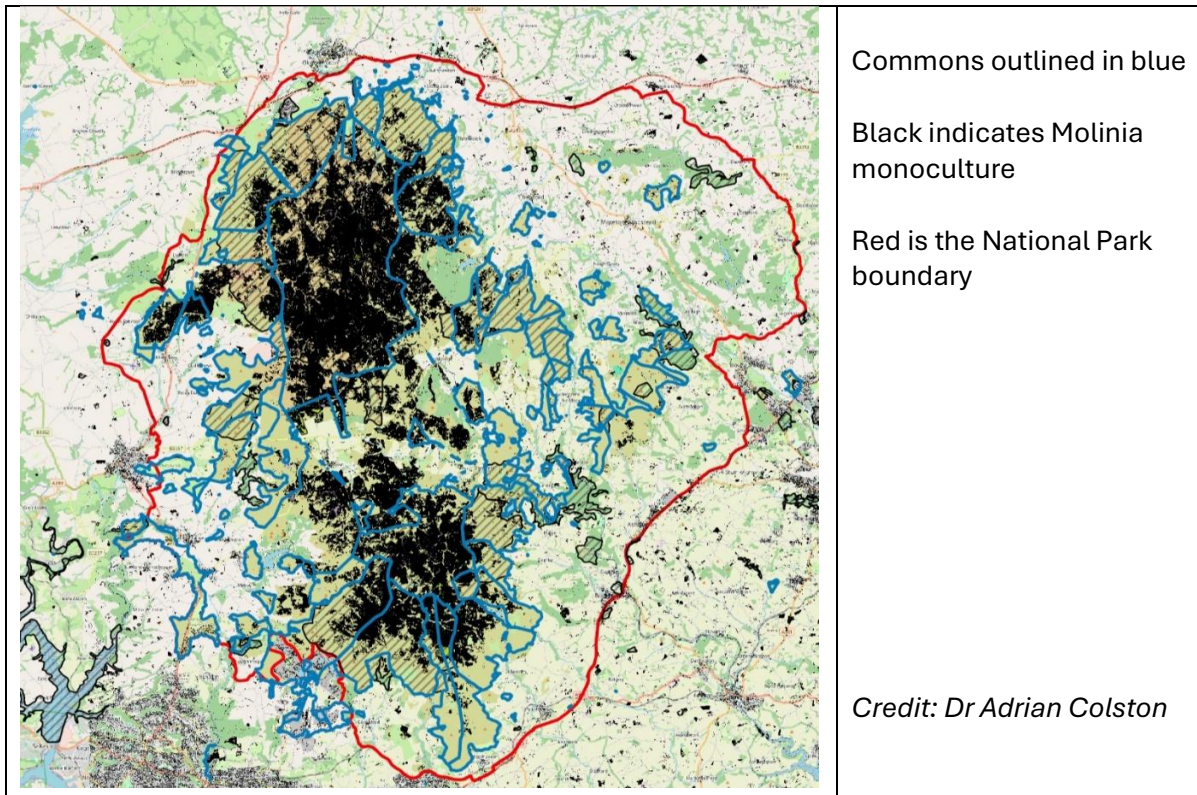
If a Dartmoor common has retained a 'pony density' outside their Higher Level Stewardship stocking calendar, the threat to ponies is *much* greater, because any ponies within it are being pulled in to the contract stocking calendar for the first time.

Either way, the semi-wild Dartmoor Hill Pony population will be reduced hugely and imminently by Natural England's decision not to wait for the outcomes of the Dartmoor Land Use Management Group, but move

commons into Countryside Stewardship now, with the lower stocking numbers that originally sparked the Dartmoor Review.

Molinia dominance

The extent of the invasion of Molinia grass on Dartmoor commons is most easily demonstrated with this map, produced after extensive surveys:



English Nature vegetation maps evidence that Molinia was managed and covered 1% of the commons in the late 1980s. Today, Molinia is sitting on blanket bog and putting Sites of Special Scientific Interest into unfavourable condition. It suffocates all other plant species and habitats for insects, birds and reptiles has diminished.

It is estimated that 10-20% (the highest plateau area) of this Molinia-dominant area can be restored by re-wetting. The Dartmoor Hill Pony Association is not aware of a completed, peer-reviewed, published scientific study which evidences the impact of rewetting as a Molinia management tool as yet.

There are completed scientific studies, peer-reviewed and published, which evidence that grazing by ponies, and cattle, manages Molinia and that the genetic adaptation to Dartmoor makes the semi-wild Dartmoor Hill Pony able to do this job in the harshest parts of the moor.¹ Natural England accepts this evidence as part of their scientific evidence portfolio.

Semi-wild Dartmoor Hill Ponies have been present on the commons of Dartmoor for more than 4,500yrs and are uniquely adapted to the vegetation and landscape. The Dartmoor Hill Pony Association asserts that grazing by ponies, and cattle, has a central role to play in the restoration of large areas of Dartmoor taken over by Molinia.

¹ **Lunt, P. et al 2021 Conservation Evidence Journal** 'Using Dartmoor ponies in conservation grazing to reduce Molinia caerulea dominance and encourage germination of Calluna vulgaris in heathland vegetation on Dartmoor, UK'; **Fraser M, Stanley C, Hegarty M 2019 Biological Conservation** 'Recognising the potential role of native ponies in conservation management'

Now is not the time to reduce numbers of semi-wild Dartmoor Hill Ponies by even one.

Agri-environment Schemes

The extent of the *Molinia* dominance suggests that it would be foolish to lose *any* ponies - best tool for the enhancement of Dartmoor's biodiversity. As shown above, whether or not ponies are moved into contract stocking calendars for the first time, or not, Natural England's decision to move Dartmoor Commons into Countryside Stewardship, pre-judging the outcomes of the Dartmoor Land Use Management Group, requires the current livestock numbers to be reduced by a minimum of 56-89% and, in many instances, much more.

The pressure to reduce livestock by this amount puts semi-wild ponies in a position of huge direct competition with cattle for its right to stand where they have been for millennia. This is in direct contradiction to the recommendations of the Dartmoor Review.

Sustaining Livelihoods

Semi-wild Dartmoor Hill Pony herds require the commoners that manage them to have financially viable farms. If the commoners fail, the semi-wild Dartmoor Hill Ponies will go with them. It is not semi-wild ponies *or* cattle; it is semi-wild ponies *and* cattle.

Ponies financially supported in agreement stocking calendars

Any financial support that ponies may receive if listed in the contract stocking calendars is only available to those remaining after a *minimum* number reduction of 56-89%. This includes any grazing supplement or Native At Risk support which is made available as the semi-wild Dartmoor Hill Pony is already classed by Defra as numerically endangered.

These payments would first require the removal of hundreds of semi-wild Dartmoor Hill Ponies.

Pony Identification

The Dartmoor Nature Alliance may not be aware of the work by the Dartmoor Hill Pony Association, with the vast support from the Friends of the Dartmoor Hill Pony, to microchip and digitally register each Dartmoor Hill Pony. In accordance with Dartmoor Commoners' Council regulations, semi-wild Dartmoor Hill Ponies are also permanently visibly marked. The incidence of a pony's keeper not being identified at Drift time has dramatically fallen since the Dartmoor Hill Pony Association has voluntarily implemented microchipping.

Equines, by law, can not be ear-tagged or ear-marked.

Every member of the Dartmoor Hill Pony Association signs a contract agreeing to manage their herd of semi-wild Dartmoor Hill Ponies to the highest of standards. The Membership contract can be seen on the Dartmoor Hill Pony Association website.

The procedure that must be followed if a commoner gathers livestock or ponies with no identified owner is laid out in the Dartmoor Commons Act and Regulations. The Dartmoor Hill Pony Association offers its own Unmarked Pony Service to support members, as explained on the Dartmoor Hill Pony Association website.

The Dartmoor Hill Pony Association has a Constitution and is a Company limited by guarantee.