

Ponies on Dartmoor

The Dartmoor Commoners' Council was set up for the maintenance of and the promotion of proper standards of livestock husbandry on the commons of Dartmoor. The Regulations that emanate from the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985, the Act that established the Council, require all ponies over 12 months to be permanently marked to enable their ownership to be easily identified. These Regulations also confirm the Council's role to ensure the number of livestock (including ponies) placed on the common by any individual does not exceed their rights to graze.

We wish to see ponies remain an iconic and valued part of the Dartmoor landscape and for all ponies on the commons to be healthy and treated well. The Council recognises all ponies and treats them in a similar manner.

The Council has a role in securing a future for ponies on Dartmoor and is taking action to provide a safer future for ponies on Dartmoor. However some aspects of providing a long-term future for ponies lie outside our remit.

Why do the ponies face an uncertain future?

In the past the ponies were valuable. The annual crop of foals provided an income for the farmers who were pony herders. The foals were sought after for riding; their temperament and hardiness made them ideal for children. Excess foals were sold into the meat trade; for human consumption and for pet food.

Today a foal has little or no value, the result mainly of the loss of a market. As with all other parts of the UK the current economic climate has severely reduced the number of people who can afford to keep a pony for their children as costs have risen dramatically. At the same time recent regulations, including requiring pony passports and changes to how ponies can be transported, have reduced or removed the market for foals. These regulations have further increased the costs associated with keeping ponies on the moors.

On some commons ponies are supported by agri-environment schemes because the ponies provide a unique contribution to managing vegetation. On these commons a certain number of ponies are allowed and their owners are financially rewarded but the ponies have to compete for this support with cattle and sheep, which are more economically viable to the farmers. However, including ponies within agreements is not always appropriate and the numbers of ponies required is difficult to assess.

Probably partly as a result of the economic situation the number of un-marked ponies has increased. Owners unable to continue to fund the keeping of their pony have dumped some on Dartmoor. Other ponies originate from Dartmoor but have been returned to the moor after failing to sell at market or were never taken to market as their owner recognised that the costs incurred out-weighted the possible income.

These un-marked ponies are illegal and can, and do, place an additional burden on commoners. These ponies can lead to non-compliance of agri-environment schemes resulting in financial penalties imposed on the relevant Commoner's Association. These

feral ponies also disrupt established herds. They have to be gathered and removed from the common. This is not an easy task and is both costly and time consuming and the commoners who undertake this difficult job have to bear the cost and, often, ill-informed criticism.

The plight of the hill ponies attracts considerable public attention. Everyone wants to see the ponies have a future but some of the action and lobby groups promote ideas that are not practical, simplistic and fail to address a complex situation.

What is the Dartmoor Commoners' Council doing?

- Council works closely with Dartmoor Livestock Protection Society to address welfare issues. The employment of a livestock welfare officer has resulted in a general increase in the health of ponies on Dartmoor and the removal of animals in poor condition.
- Council work with pony herders to address issues and find solutions and convenes its own pony-working group; its members represent a variety of breeds.
- Council works closely with the Local Commoners' Associations to ensure their common holds only those ponies legally entitled to be there. In order for them to address the issue of un-marked ponies on their commons Council offered an amnesty during the autumn and winter of 2013/14 and already over 100 un-marked ponies have been removed from the commons and commoners have been encouraged to match the number of ponies to the number of registered rights. Council will consider legal action if pony herders fail to abide by the Regulations.
- Once the un-marked ponies are removed efforts to maintain a sustainable number of ponies will begin. Already we are investigating the impacts of reducing breeding mares or removing stallions. But such actions may have implications; for example removal of the stallions may result in the herds dispersing away from their allocated area enable unsuitable stallions fathering another crop of foals. Contraception projects are under-way, which may enable the mares and stallions to remain but significantly reduce the number of unwanted foals.
- Council is encouraging the pony herders to develop innovative markets that will result in ponies having a value so they can retain their place alongside the cattle and sheep on Dartmoor.