



# **Baseline Report for Appropriate Assessment [under the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc (Amendment) (England & Wales) Regulations 2006] of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2014 - 2019**

5 July 2013

## **1. Introduction**

The EU Natura 2000 network provides ecological infrastructure for the protection of sites which are of exceptional importance in respect of rare, endangered or vulnerable natural habitats and species within the European Community. These sites which are also referred to as European sites consist of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Offshore Marine Site (OMS) (there are no OMS designated at present). Ramsar sites (Internationally Important Wetlands) are also treated as if they were European sites.

The Habitat Regulations require plans or projects to be assessed before they can be adopted, to ensure that they have no significant environmental effect on sites of European Interest (N2K). Natural England considers that whilst it is not clear that AONB Management Plans set the framework for development, they are plans which may well have significant effects (both positive and negative) on sites covered by the Habitats Regulations - Natura 2000 sites. Thus they need to be assessed before the plans can be adopted to ensure that they have no significant environmental effect (adverse effect) on such sites.

Whilst assessment under the Habitats Regulations (sometimes referred to as Appropriate Assessment) is considered to be required for AONB Management Plans, AONB units and Natural England should be able to ensure that the exercise is "fit for purpose". It is expected that there will be few policies, or proposals, which would pose a significant threat to Sites of European Importance (SAC and SPAs - Natura 2000 sites) which are covered by the Habitats Regulations.

This document is guided by and refers to Natural England (2007) *The Assessment of AONB Management Plans under the provisions of the Habitats Regulations. Natural England's guidance on the requirement to undertake so-called "Appropriate Assessment"*.

## Sites to be considered

This baselining exercise has identified the following sites to be considered.

The only European site protected under the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) within the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is:

**The Stiperstones and the Hollies SAC (Ref UK 0012810, 601.8ha).**

Just outside the boundary of the AONB, and clearly affected by activities within it, is:

**River Clun SAC (Ref (UK0030250, 15.0ha).**

Slightly further from the AONB, and possibly affected in some way by activities within the AONB, is:

**Downton Gorge SAC (Ref UK 0012735, 68.9ha).**

No sites protected as Special Protections Areas under the Birds Directive or Ramsar sites have been identified in or near the Shropshire Hills AONB.

## Evidence gathering for Appropriate Assessment (AA)

The Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan draft and Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report contain a large volume of environmental data and are part of the evidence gathering process.

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) Draft Guidance on AA (August 2006) states (on page 8) that it would be best practice to collect information for AA, especially in relation to:

1. European sites within and outside the plan area potentially affected;
2. The characteristics of these European sites;
3. Their conservation objectives; and
4. Other relevant plans or projects.

In accordance with this guidance the following information is presented in this report for scrutiny by Natural England as the statutory consultee. It is also presented to the following:

Shropshire Council

Herefordshire Council

Natural Resources Wales

Confirmation from Natural England is sought on the sites identified, and information requested on any updates to their conservation objectives.

## AA reports: Methodology

Whilst the assessment under the Habitats Regulations is commonly referred to as "Appropriate Assessment" (AA) it is considered unlikely that a "full" AA will be required for AONB Management Plans. The "competent authority" as prescribed by the Habitats Regulations is the AONB partnership on behalf of, or as sanctioned by, the local planning authorities.

This baseline report presents data and evidence related to European sites. Subsequent AA reports will be produced focused on testing plan options in emerging review of the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan. These AA Reports will assess the same draft plan as the SA process. SA and AA are two separate but complementary processes.

These AA reports will assess options in terms of the AA Tasks suggested in DCLG Guidance:

**AA Task 1: Likely significant effects**

Basically this is a screening process and this will determine whether the subsequent steps of AA (Tasks 2 & 3) are required. This test will be chiefly carried out by the AONB Partnership staff in consultation with Natural England as necessary. All of the AONB Management Plan policies and any detailed plan proposals or actions will be screened.

**AA Task 2: Appropriate Assessment and ascertaining the effect on site integrity**

To be completed for plan policies if there are found to be likely significant effects.

**AA Task 3: Mitigation measures and alternative solutions**

To be completed where a plan policy has been found to have likely significant effects on the integrity of a European site.

It is expected that the bulk of the assessment, of the policies and proposals in the AONB Management Plan, will be a matter of screening for possible negative significant effects on Natura 2000 sites. It is not expected that full appropriate assessment would be required in most instances as it is hoped that any potential adverse effects can be "screened out".

## **"In combination" assessment**

Paragraph 5.9 of DCLG Draft Guidance on AA (August 2006) Planning for the Protection of European Sites: Appropriate Assessment – Guidance For Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Documents August 2006 states: "The assessment of significant effects of a given option needs to take account of the option's impact in combination with other plans and projects. Only other key plans and projects which the RPB or LPA consider most relevant should be collected for the "in combination" test. An exhaustive list could render the assessment exercise unworkable. Consult Natural England on the list identified."

Bearing this in mind the basic list of relevant plans is proposed as follows:

West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) (currently in draft)

Relevant Local Development Documents (LDDs) within the Local Development Framework (LDF) of the District Authority in which the site is located.

Adopted District Local Plans.

Local Transport Plans (LTP2).

Minerals and Waste Local Plans / Local Development Frameworks

In combination effects and cumulative effects are required to be tested but may involve some complexity of approach. It is Natural England's view that if the Management plan does not have a significant environmental effect then it is not necessary to carry out an in combination assessment .

# The Stiperstones and The Hollies

## Site details

Location of The Stiperstones and The Hollies SAC/SCI/cSAC Country England

Unitary Authority Shropshire

Centroid SJ375006

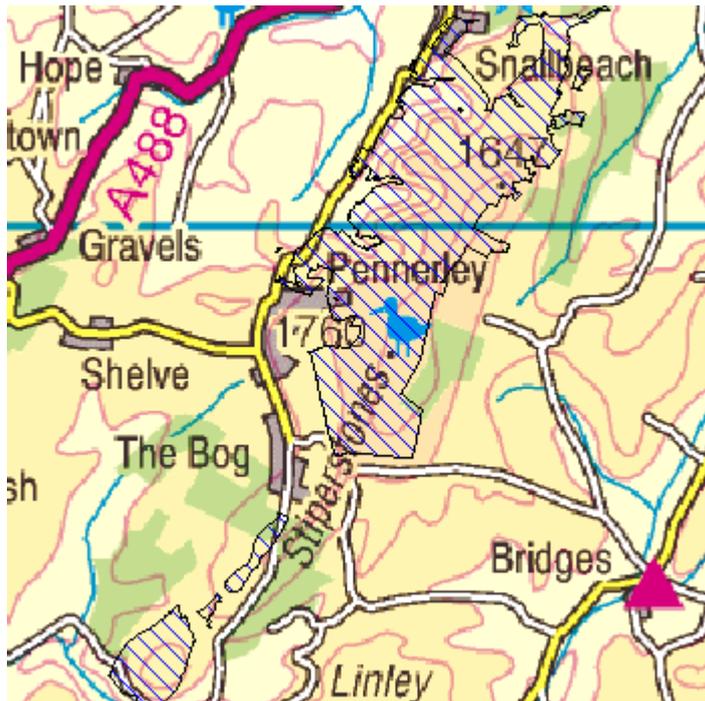
Latitude 52 35 57 N

Longitude 02 55 24 W

SAC EU code UK0012810

Status Designated Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

Area (ha) 601.46



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## General site character

Bogs. Marshes. Water fringed vegetation. Fens (1%)

Heath. Scrub. Maquis and garrigue. *Phygrana* (75%)

Dry grassland. Steppes (10%)

Broad-leaved deciduous woodland (10%)

Inland rocks. Screes. Sands. Permanent snow and ice (4%)

## Annex I habitats that are a primary reason for selection of this site

4030 European dry heaths

This site in central Britain is an example of European dry heaths that contains features transitional between lowland heathland and upland heather moorland. The most extensive vegetation type present is H12 *Calluna vulgaris* – *Vaccinium myrtillus* dry heath, which is characteristic of the uplands. South-facing slopes support stands of H8 *Calluna vulgaris* – *Ulex gallii* heath, a predominantly lowland vegetation community of south-west Britain. The heathland of the Stiperstones is in excellent condition because it is managed by a programme of rotational, controlled winter burning and cutting.

## Annex I habitats present as a qualifying feature, but not a primary reason for selection of this site

91A0 Old sessile oak woods with *Ilex* and *Blechnum* in the British Isles

Annex II species that are a primary reason for selection of this site

Not applicable.

Annex II species present as a qualifying feature, but not a primary reason for site selection

Not applicable.

**Other site characteristics**

**Soil & geology:**

Acidic, Nutrient-poor, Quartzite, Sedimentary

**Geomorphology & landscape:**

Crags/ledges, Upland

**Quality and importance**

European dry heaths

- for which this is considered to be one of the best areas in the United Kingdom.

Old sessile oak woods with *Ilex* and *Blechnum* in the British Isles

- for which the area is considered to support a significant presence.

**Vulnerability**

The heathland is dependent on the continuation of traditional heather moorland management with rotational burning or cutting supplemented by light grazing. In the recent past, lack of management on parts of the site has resulted in scrub encroachment, and on other parts high stocking levels has caused overgrazing and a deterioration of the heathland interest. These issues are being addressed by an effective management programme on that part of the site which is managed as a National Nature Reserve and, on land in private ownership, by management agreements and ESA payments. The sessile oak woods have been traditionally managed either as high forest or as oak coppice. Neglect and grazing of coppiced woods in the past has led to a deterioration in woodland interest. Traditional management of these woods has been reinstated by effective management of the National Nature Reserve and by agreement of a site management statement with woodlands in private ownership.

# River Clun

## Site details

Location of River Clun SAC/SCI/cSAC

Country	England
Unitary Authority	Herefordshire; Shropshire
Centroid	SO393754
Latitude	52 22 22 N
Longitude	02 53 30 W
SAC EU code	UK0030250
Status	Designated Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
Area (ha)	14.93



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## General site character

Inland water bodies (standing water, running water) (33%)

Improved grassland (55%)

Broad-leaved deciduous woodland (12%)

## Annex I habitats that are a primary reason for selection of this site

Not applicable

## Annex I habitats present as a qualifying feature, but not a primary reason for selection of this site

Not applicable.

## Annex II species that are a primary reason for selection of this site

Not applicable.

Annex II species present as a qualifying feature, but not a primary reason for site selection

1029 Freshwater pearl mussel *Margaritifera margaritifera*

**Other site characteristics**

**Soil & geology:**

Basic, Clay, Neutral, Sandstone, Shingle

**Geomorphology & landscape:**

Floodplain, Lowland

**Quality and importance**

*Margaritifera margaritifera*

- for which the area is considered to support a significant presence.

**Vulnerability**

*Margaritifera margaritifera* is dependent on low sediment and nitrate levels, fast flows of cool water and clean gravels. It also relies on the presence of trout for part of its breeding cycle. Intensification of agriculture across the catchment is a significant threat to the long-term survival of the isolated population at this site i.e. enhanced sedimentation through poor agricultural practice leading to smothering of adult and juvenile mussels; eutrophication of waters through fertiliser run-off from adjacent land. In addition upstream domestic sewage treatment works are believed to give a significant nutrient loading. Recent increases in the occurrence of alder disease also poses a risk through loss of shading bankside tree cover. Some of these issues will be addressed by revised authorisation, Review of Consents /AMP 4 processes. Sustainable agricultural management is being promoted via production of Whole Farm Plans, Environmentally Sensitive Area Agreements and Countryside Stewardship Agreements for landowners within the catchment.

## Downton Gorge

### Site details

Location of Downton Gorge SAC/SCI/cSAC

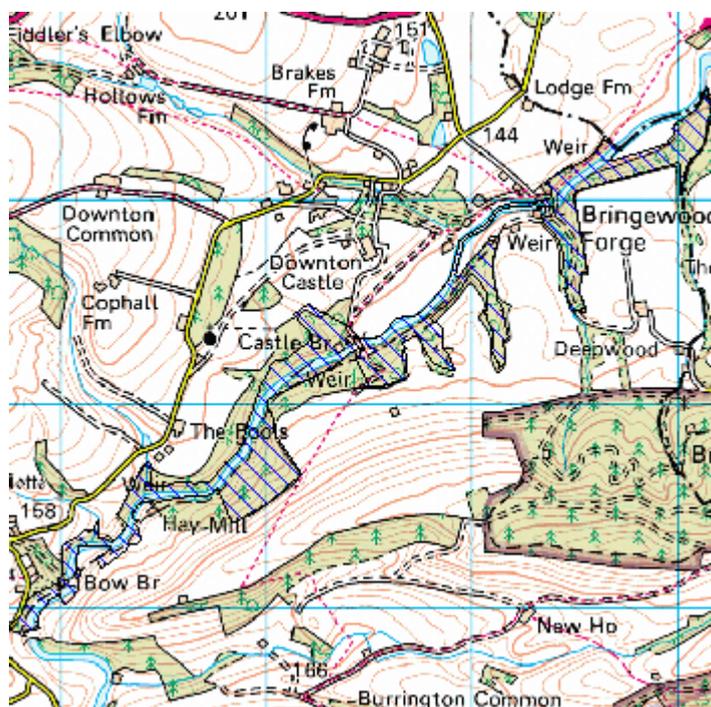
Country	England
Unitary Authority	Herefordshire
Centroid	SO443743
Latitude	52 21 48 N
Longitude	02 49 07 W
SAC EU code	UK0012735
Status	Designated Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
Area (ha)	69.3

### General site character

Inland water bodies (standing water, running water) (14%)

Broad-leaved deciduous woodland (85%)

Coniferous woodland (1%)



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### Annex I habitats that are a primary reason for selection of this site

#### **9180 *Tilio-Acerion* forests of slopes, screes and ravines** \* Priority feature

Downton Gorge is an example of *Tilio-Acerion* forests in a narrow ravine with a distinctive microclimate and a variety of slopes and aspects. Both small-leaved lime *Tilia cordata* and large-leaved lime *T. platyphyllos* occur, together with ash *Fraxinus excelsior* and elm *Ulmus* spp. The ground flora includes wood fescue *Festuca altissima* and violet helleborine *Epipactis purpurata*. The gorge cliffs are rich in ferns, reflecting the humidity of the site, with a wide range of species recorded.

Annex I habitats present as a qualifying feature, but not a primary reason for selection of this site

Not applicable.

Annex II species that are a primary reason for selection of this site

Not applicable.

Annex II species present as a qualifying feature, but not a primary reason for site selection

Not applicable.

### **Other site characteristics**

#### **Soil & geology:**

Acidic, Alluvium, Basic, Limestone

#### **Geomorphology & landscape:**

Crags/ledges, Lowland, Valley

### **Quality and importance**

*Tilio-Acerion* forests of slopes, scree and ravines

- for which this is considered to be one of the best areas in the United Kingdom.

### **Vulnerability**

The site is potentially vulnerable to the effects of air- and water-borne pollution, particularly in respect of its significant lichenological interest. However these effects are not related to the management of the site.

Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc (Amendment) (England & Wales) Regulations 2006  
 Appropriate Assessment of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2009 - 2014  
 Screening Matrix

Site	Qualifying Features	Key environmental conditions to support site integrity	Possible impacts arising from Plan	Is there a risk of a significant effect?	Possible impacts from other plans, trends, etc	Is there a risk of significant 'in combination' effects?
The Stiperstones and The Hollies	4030 European dry heaths H8 – <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>ulex galli</i> heath, H10 – <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Erica cinerea</i> heath, H12 – <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>vaccinium myrtillus</i> heath, H18 – <i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i> – <i>Deschampsia flexuosa</i> heath,	No direct loss of habitat. Management by appropriate grazing to limit succession and maintain habitat diversity. Control of bracken.	The Plan contains policies and actions supporting enjoyment of the Shropshire Hills landscape. These are put forward alongside a strong focus on a sensitive approach by visitors, raised understanding etc, so they are likely to help reduce any pressures on heathland from recreation rather than exacerbate them (the Stiperstones is already a 'spotlight NNR' and well promoted). The Plan includes an approach to disperse recreation pressure (likely to help a popular site such as the Stiperstones).	No	The Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme will undertake conservation measures which will benefit the setting of the NNR and possibly the reserve directly. It will include sensitive access proposals but does not have explicit aims to increase visitor numbers.	No

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The Stiperstones and The Hollies	91A0 Old sessile oak woods with <i>Ilex</i> and <i>Blechnum</i> in the British Isles W16 – <i>Quercus</i> spp – <i>Betula</i> spp - <i>Deschampsia flexuosa</i> woodland.	No loss of ancient semi-natural stands. At least current area of recent semi-natural stands maintained, although their location may alter. No loss of ancient woodland. For wood pasture/parkland: No loss of semi-natural wood-pasture mosaic area. No reduction in the number of veteran trees.	The Plan contains no policies or actions which could detrimentally affect the woodland. The Plan gives priority to habitat restoration in the Long Mynd – Stiperstones area which may help to buffer or link with habitats within the SAC. Consultation processes would ensure that any woodland creation adjacent to the site was done appropriately, e.g. allowing natural regeneration if possible, avoiding planting of aggressive non native species such as sycamore which could colonise the woodlands within the site.	No	Shropshire Council has carried out woodland sensitivity mapping which also helps to provide guidance on new woodland creation.	No

Site	Qualifying Features	Key environmental conditions to support site integrity	Possible impacts arising from Plan	Is there a risk of a significant effect?	Possible impacts from other plans, trends, etc	Is there a risk of significant 'in combination' effects?
River Clun	1029 Freshwater pearl mussel <i>Margaritifera margaritifera</i>	<i>M. margaritifera</i> is dependent on low sediment and nitrate levels, fast flows of cool water and clean gravels. It is also relies on the presence of trout for part of its breeding cycle. Agricultural practices across the catchment are a key threat to favourable conditions e.g. eutrophication of waters through fertiliser run-off. In addition upstream domestic sewage treatment works are believed to give a significant nutrient loading.	The Plan includes policies and actions to improve the condition of the River Clun SAC. The AONB Partnership has taken the lead in recent years in survey and monitoring of the pearl mussel population, raising awareness of its importance and encouraging uptake of appropriate agri-environment and Catchment Sensitive Farming grant options.	No negative effects	Positive interactions with River Teme Catchment Sensitive Farming Initiative and agri-environment schemes.	No negative effects.

Site	Qualifying Features	Key environmental conditions to support site integrity	Possible impacts arising from Plan	Is there a risk of a significant effect?	Possible impacts from other plans, trends, etc	Is there a risk of significant 'in combination' effects?
Downton Gorge	9180 <i>Tilio-Acerion</i> forests of slopes, screes and ravines * Priority feature Semi-natural broadleaved woodland. <i>W8 – Fraxinus excelsior – acer campestre – mercurialis perennis</i> woodland. <i>W10 – Quercus robur – pteridium aquilinum – rubus fruticosus</i> woodland <i>W6 – Alnus glutinosa urtica dioica</i> woodland: <i>Sambus nigra</i>	No loss of ancient semi-natural stands. At least current area of recent semi-natural stands maintained, although their location may alter. No loss of ancient woodland. For wood pasture/parkland: No loss of semi-natural wood-pasture mosaic area. No reduction in the number of veteran trees.	No impacts. The site lies on the River Teme downstream of the AONB, but the woodland features of the site will not be affected in any way by influences of the Management Plan.	No	-	No
Bomere, Shomere and Betton Pools	Fen, marsh and swamp. Semi – natural broadleaved woodland. Bog. Standing open water. Wet woodland.	Water availability and quality. Management, e.g. by grazing to prevent succession.	No impacts. The site lies several miles outside the AONB boundary and is not fed by watercourse originating in the AONB.	No	-	No