

## **Wales Upland Ecosystem Group Priority Action**

### **Cwm Idwal Habitat Restoration**

Snowdonia is an important location for herb-rich cliff ledge communities with many of these areas being designated as being of International importance. Cwm Idwal NNR is a key component of the Eryri Special Area of Conservation (SAC) as it holds most of the Annex 1 habitats for which the SAC is notified. These include: tall-herb ledge communities, chasmophytic vegetation on siliceous and calcareous rocks, acidic scree, montane heath/grasslands, dry and wet heath and species rich *Nardus* grassland. In addition to these important communities, the mountains of Eryri are the southernmost limit for a number of plant species and vegetation communities in the UK, with Cwm Idwal being the stronghold for many of these. However, in common with much of upland Wales the site has been heavily grazed by sheep in the past, and practically all the vegetation communities, except perhaps the aquatic flora, have suffered from high grazing levels, with some now being confined, in small populations, to the steepest cliffs where grazing animals seldom reach.

In 1998 an agreement was reached to remove stock grazing from Cwm Idwal NNR for an initial exclusion period of 50 years, to enable the vegetation communities to recover and the long-term future management of the site to be developed. The aim of this management is to allow the cliff-bound plant communities to spread to adjacent rocky sites and the suppressed heaths to regenerate and flourish. The importance of this project is heightened in view of the threat from climate change. Many of the species growing high in the Welsh mountains are more commonly found in arctic and alpine habitats in the northern hemisphere.

The habitats in our mountains are sub-optimal for these species which are at the edges of their range and so vulnerable to changes in temperature or rainfall. This heightens the importance of these sites and the necessity to manage them to increase the population sizes of these rarer plants, to help improve their reproductive performance and increase their genetic variability and so reduce the possibilities of extinction from the site. This is also a wonderful opportunity to enable a natural vegetation succession to develop from the base to the summit of a mountain in a 'core' area of importance in the Eryri SAC. This is of the highest importance educationally, as well as from a conservation and research viewpoint and has been pursued to help CCW to fulfil its international obligations to protect and conserve some of the features of the SAC which are currently in an unfavourable condition.

This is a very costly project which has involved shepherding and detailed monitoring of the short and long-term impacts of the removal of grazing. The project also now has a high profile and many organisations and individuals are eagerly watching changes. However, this is now being compromised by the large and increasing number of feral goats regularly browsing in the Cwm. Goats are able to access the cliff ledge communities, including some of the most fragile areas which are not accessible to sheep. In 2006 they killed a number of saplings which would have formed an important core of trees to facilitate future establishment of trees and scrub in the NNR. Recently they have been noted to be sheltering in the boulder scree where there are many relatively easily accessible and sensitive rare chasmophytic species. Long-term conservation projects such as the reintroduction of *Saxifraga cespitosa* could be terminated in a few minutes by a goat browsing on the 2-3 boulders on which it occurs. Due to the goats increasingly using the Cwm, a significant amount of grazing is still taking place on the accessible herb rich vegetation and the regenerating heaths potentially nullifying the positive impact of reducing sheep grazing in such areas.

If we do not manage the feral goat population in Cwm Idwal NNR then much of the effort and resources put into this long-term project will have been wasted and, in addition to failing to meet the Welsh Assembly target to bring this key site into favourable condition by 2010, it is unlikely that favourable condition will ever be reached in the foreseeable future. We need to ensure that there is not a resident goat population, nor regular incursions of goats in the NNR, therefore removal of goats becoming habituated to the site is urgently required to protect this internationally important site.

***Action Required***

- Continued exclusion of domestic stock and shepherding to remove straying stock
- Continued management of feral goats
- Continued survey and monitoring

***Key Section 42 Species***

Tufted Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga cespitosa</i>
Globeflower	<i>Trollius europeus</i>

***Other Section 42 Species***

An eyebright	<i>Euphrasia cambrica</i>
An eyebright	<i>Euphrasia rivularis</i>
Oblong woodsia	<i>Woodsia ilvensis</i>
Holly fern	<i>Polystichum lonchitis</i>
Juniper	<i>Juniperus communis</i>
Hawkweeds	<i>Hieracium</i> sp.
Stag's-horn clubmoss	<i>Lycopodium clavatum</i>