

Dartmoor Nature Alliance Vision

This vision is for discussion, a work in progress, rather than the final word. Over the coming months, we really want to get more people involved in refining this vision so that people like you can correctly say, "This is my vision," too. Then campaign to bring the vision to life! The more voices we have, the better able we will be to ensure that nature's voice does not get drowned out. If you'd like to register your interest in supporting the Dartmoor Nature Alliance, contact us at info@dartmoornature.org.uk

Dartmoor has the potential to be one of the most outstanding places for wildlife in Europe. Its topographic variation, geological diversity and location on the Atlantic fringe makes it truly special. But despite its scenic beauty, Dartmoor's natural heritage is a pale shadow of what it could be.

Our vision for Dartmoor is a place where nature is in the ascendancy, and from which wildlife spills over into the surrounding countryside, where the needs of the natural environment come first, not as an afterthought or as part of a mean compromise. Like our greatest buildings and works of art, Dartmoor will be valued first and foremost for the quality of its natural heritage and its life-enhancing qualities, not merely as a resource to be exploited or an amenity to be utilised. Dartmoor will be a haven where people go to be inspired by nature and all it has to offer and to experience what it means to immerse yourself in a landscape where wildlife is returning, spreading and thriving.

If this vision is to become reality, Dartmoor needs to heal. This healing process will need to embrace every part of the park, from the high tors to the enclosed fields.

A land of blanket bogs and mires

Dartmoor is – or once was - a land of deep peat, of blanket bogs and mires stretching out across the high moorland and hugging the valley bottoms. Centuries of exploitation and mismanagement have destroyed much of this. The peat is degraded, and Purple Moor Grass ("Molinia") now dominates much of the landscape. We want to see all of Dartmoor's peat bogs, valley mires and wet flushes fully restored, so that monotonous stretches of Molinia make way for waving seas of cotton grass, bog asphodel, and an astonishing colour palette of mosses. With the scars of peat cutting and artificial drainage gone, these natural sponges will function properly, storing water, reducing flood risk and capturing carbon.

Wild Rivers

Thirteen rivers rise on Dartmoor, and their upper reaches are among the wildest and most dramatic riverscapes in England. All these watercourses will run free from agricultural and human pollutants. Artificial obstructions to migrating fish will have been removed, but fallen trees and natural deadwood will remain. Meandering or braiding freely within their valleys, rivers and streams will be teeming with all kinds of aquatic life, dragonflies and water-loving birds like the dipper. Every river spilling out of Dartmoor will be stunning to look at, safe to drink from and a delight to swim in.

Rainforests

Atlantic rainforests and upland woods once cloaked much of Dartmoor. In recent centuries they have been reduced to tiny fragments, hugging the steeper banks of the rivers' upper

reaches. We want to see these woodlands making a dramatic comeback, colonising valleys like the Erme, Okement and Avon, spreading over the hills between catchments and reconnecting isolated slivers like Wistman's Wood. Dark ranks of coniferous monoculture will be long gone. In their place will be forests with diverse structures, open glades and wood pastures, managed for continuous cover. These woods provide a home to hundreds of species of rare lichen, ferns and fungi, which proliferate in twisted boughs and moss-clad boulders, while the song of wood warbler and redstart echoes through the trees.

Heathland

Around the blanket bogs, above the rainforests and rivers, lie the heaths. Relentlessly overgrazed and burned, large tracts of this once rich habitat are now little more than species-poor grassland.

We want to see these ecological deserts swept aside to make way for a shifting mosaic of heather and bilberry, bracken, scrub, scattered trees, packed with wildflowers. Intensive grazing by sheep in winter will be a thing of the past, but modest numbers of cattle, sheep and ponies will wander the heaths in the summer. The heaths will no longer feel bleak and empty - to walk between the tors in spring will be to drift through a soundscape of bird calls and a rainbow of colours.

A wild place

Dartmoor will always be a land of immense variety, but its many faces will no longer be defined by hard lines and fences. Boundaries will be soft, blurred and shifting, so that woodland gradually gives way to scrub and eventually open habitats. Hardy breeds of cattle, ponies and other large herbivores that were once found on the moor will play a crucial role in managing this patchwork, browsing, bulldozing and opening up new areas. And these soft boundaries will fuel the recovery of myriad species. Waders like the dunlin will thrive on the uplands and bogs; pied flycatchers and other songbirds in the woods, curlew, lapwing and clouds of insects in the meadows, raptors like the white tailed eagle and lammergeier circling in the skies above. Dartmoor will welcome new arrivals that help to shape the habitats and keep wild populations in balance – beaver, pine marten and wildcat among them.

Farmland

Half of Dartmoor is enclosed farmland, and much of this has been heavily improved for agriculture. All Dartmoor's farmland will be managed regeneratively. By reducing inputs and working with natural processes to deliver a wider range of public goods alongside environmentally responsible food production, farming will be more profitable and resilient. Hedges will be allowed to grow out and reinstated where they have been removed, and they will be alive with birdsong and the buzzing of insects. Pesticides and fertilisers will no longer be used and intensive slurry spreading will have ceased. Arable fields will have wildflower-rich boundaries and headlands, and meadows will be rich in wildflowers. No cultivated land will be left bare over winter. Trees along hedgerows and in fields will return in abundance.

Building resilience

Dartmoor's dramatic transformation won't just benefit nature. Cleaner rivers will save us money and improve our health. Restored peat bogs will capture more carbon and reduce flooding. And a far more impressive and biodiverse landscape will bring in more visitors

seeking a higher quality wildlife experience. New outdoor activities, offering high quality jobs, will spring up across in the park. A healthier environment will mean a healthier economy.

Healing this wounded land

If this healing is to happen, Dartmoor will need to be a place of tolerance and cooperation; where communities listen, learn from each other and collectively find the courage to face up to common challenges. It will be somewhere people go to find communion, build bridges and witness bold new initiatives being put into practice; a land where people look to the future rather than hanging onto the past, and where the desire for recovery cannot be held back by small but powerful and highly vocal minorities.

And this spirit of tolerance means that Dartmoor will be somewhere that welcomes people, wherever they live and whatever their background. Visitors will be able to visit the National Park unimpeded, but always with respect. Dogs will be kept under control and away from sensitive sites, and litter will no longer defile popular hotspots. Dartmoor will not just be a place of quiet enjoyment – it will be a haven of inspiration, physical healing and spiritual renewal. Anyone who visits Dartmoor will remember the experience for the rest of their lives.