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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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RENEWAL OF THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA

On-th-spot appraisal of the
Lüneburg Heath protected landscape
(Federal Republic of Germany)

by
Dr. A. FROMENT
Botany Department
Liège University (Belgium)

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In 1967 the Lüneburg Heath protected landscape was awarded the Council of Europe Diploma in the "protected landscape" category on account of its scientific interest, transcending the national sphere, and the existence of a suitable system of protection.

The protected landscape (Naturschutzgebiet = NSG) extends over almost 200 km² and includes one of the largest expanses of heath (*Calluna vulgaris*) in Northern Europe (5,000 hectares), often covered by juniper trees (*Juniperus communis*). The remainder of the NSG consists mainly of resinous forests.

In addition to being interesting for its flora and vegetation, the NSG is of great geological, geomorphological, zoological and historical interest.

The Diploma is due to expire on 25 October 1972. Under the regulations governing its renewal, an on-the-spot appraisal must be carried out to make sure that the conditions obtaining when the Diploma was awarded have been maintained or improved.

The present report gives an account of the on-the-spot appraisal which I conducted, as an independent expert, at the request of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

My visit to the Lüneburg Heath protected landscape on 21 and 22 October 1971 was made in the company of Mr. Hacourt, Administrative Officer in the Division for Environment and Natural Resources of the Council of Europe.

We were welcomed by Dr. A. TOEPFER, President of the "Verein Naturschutzpark", who kindly guided us in person during these two days. We also had talks with Dr. H. BOTHE, Administrative Officer of the Verein Naturschutzpark (= VNP).

This visit enabled us to obtain a satisfactory overall picture of the NSG, including the area at present used by the British Army for tank manoeuvres.

Unfortunately not enough time (only two days) was allowed for the inspection of this very large and very varied area and we were not given an opportunity to meet the administrative officials responsible for the management of the NSG, under the authority of the "Regierungspräsident" of Lüneburg.

Nonetheless, I was able to form an opinion as to whether renewal of the European Diploma was justified.

I have very serious reservations regarding the management methods applied in the moors, which have led to many parts of the NSG being gravely threatened. Consequently, the European Diploma should not, in my view, be re-awarded until drastic steps have been taken to improve the current situation.

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My conclusions are based on the following considerations:

Award of the Diploma

The European Diploma, awarded by the Committee of Ministers to the Lüneburg Heath protected landscape at its sitting on 25 October 1967, was presented to Dr. A. TOEPFER, President of the "Naturschutzpark e. V." by Professor SUR at a ceremony held on 29 May 1968 at Wilsede, in the Lüneburg Heath.

The Diploma was awarded to the entire NSG (approximately 20,000 hectares) exclusive of the South-West part, used by British troops as a military training ground.

The high moor area of Pietzmoor (approximately 200 hectares), which is of great scientific interest and does not form part of the military training ground, was also excluded for unaccountable reasons.

The Diploma seems to have been presented to the VNP rather than to the authorities responsible for managing the NSG because that association owns or rents more than 6,000 hectares, including most of the heather-clad moors (approximately 5,000 hectares).

Indeed, every since 1909, the VNP has never ceased to do its utmost for the conservation, protection and publicity of the Lüneburg Heath. Its unremitting efforts and considerable financial investments have resulted in:

1. the "revival" of the Heath (flocks of sheep, agriculture, restoration of rural dwellings, construction of sheep-pens, museum of rural life, etc.);
2. tourist development (parking places, signposted paths, benches, inns, etc.);
3. measures to promote the conservation and restoration of the moors.

Number of visitors

The NSG holds great attraction for the inhabitants of the neighbouring cities of Hamburg, Hanover and Bremen. Surveys conducted by the University of Hamburg (1970) showed that 3.5 million people visit the various parts of the NSG annually.

Obviously, these large numbers raise constant problems where tidyness, supervision, upkeep, etc. are concerned, especially as most visitors prefer the open heath landscape. In the high season a number of particularly popular places such as Wilsede, are crowded to saturation point.

History of the landscape

For many centuries the Lüneburg area was characterised by an extensive rural economy, based almost exclusively on the moors.

The traditional heather-clad landscape survived until the middle of the 19th century in the whole North-West part of Germany, the central Netherlands and the Belgian Campine.

Maps of the Lüneburg region at the end of the 18th century show that, at that time, roughly 90% of the present NSG was moorland, while the remainder consisted of deciduous forests, crops and meadows.

After the industrial and agricultural revolution in the second half of the 19th century, the traditional crop growing and grazing (pastures, grubbing etc.) gradually died out. Towards the beginning of the 20th century, the advent of Australian wool dealt a final blow to sheep-rearing on the moors (Heidschnucken) and although in 1860 there were 700,000 sheep in the region, this figure dropped to 300,000 sheep in 1890, 200,000 in 1900 and 100,000 in 1910, until by the end of the second world war hardly any remained.

Heath is a secondary, semi-natural form of vegetation which has gradually, from the Neolithic Age onwards, taken the place of the deciduous forest destroyed as a result of various human and animal factors. On porous sandy soil, the original forest was of the *Quercus-robora-Betuletum* type, while on soils of finer texture, the *Fago-Quercetum* variety developed.

Discontinuation of the practices associated with the former extensive rural economy "freed" large tracts of heath which the authorities and private owners then endeavoured to exploit by planting resinous forests (pine, spruce) which produce a satisfactory economic return on such types of soil.

By 1900, 50% of the present NSG had been reforested in this way.

The situation at present is as follows: the NSG extends over an area of 19,740 hectares, comprising a 11,870 hectares of commercial forest (60%), 4,450 hectares of heath, 2,270 hectares of crops and meadows, 420 hectares of mixed heath-forest-crops and 190 hectares of high moor.

The part used as a military training ground ("Rode Flächen") covers 1,845 hectares, including roughly 1,600 hectares of heath.

The accessible heath area is therefore only 2,850 hectares, i.e. 14.2% of the entire NSG.

Conservation

At the beginning of the century enlightened persons became concerned about rapid and far-reaching changes to the traditional landscape. The Totengrund, to the South of Wilsede, was bought in 1906 by the "Heidepastor" BODE and, together with the Wilsederberg, purchased in 1910, constituted the first reserve of the VNP, founded in 1909.

The first official decree concerning protection was passed in 1921, and the following year a very detailed decree setting out measures designed for protection of the landscape, fauna and flora was adopted. The second decree also specified that it was forbidden to "change the appearance of the heath, to set fire to it or to use it for purposes other than those of traditional farming (sheep-rearing, etc.)".

The 1935 Reich Act, which is still in force, confirms the previous provisions.

As the legislature has clearly defined the need for preservation of the heath, the 1935 situation should accordingly serve as a reference for establishing the relative extent of forests, heath and crops within the NSG.

Extension of the heath

During the second world war large tracts of the heath were cleared or planted without authorisation. Moreover, discontinuation of the practices associated with the former rural economy made it possible for pine, spruce and, above all, birch seedlings to spread naturally.

In a temperate climate this encroachment by spontaneous afforestation on moorland is quite normal and the birch colonisation phase marks the first stage towards a climactic forest.

Many parts of the 1935 heath are therefore now covered by trees, dating from various periods and predominantly birch ("Anflugwald"), as a result of the disappearance of the flocks and the decrease in fires.

After the second world war the number of sheep was gradually increased, although the VNP owns only six flocks representing a ratio of 1.5 sheep + lamb per hectare of heath.

This number is not sufficient to prevent the spread of natural birch seedlings and in any case sheep do not destroy young trees once these have reached a height of 1.5 to 2 metres.

The problem of encroachment by birch seedlings on many of the moors is a major source of concern in the management of the NSG.

Management of the heath

After the war, the VNP cleared natural birch seedlings from hundreds of hectares, but in recent years the administrative authorities have shown certain misgivings as to whether these measures are justified.

Considerable differences of opinion arose between the VNP and the NSG management authorities, the former taking the view that all areas covered by heath when the area was placed under protection (1935) should be retrieved while the latter, on the contrary, maintained that it was advisable to preserve most of the natural changes to the heath.

A case which was to constitute a legal precedent was brought before the administrative court in 1968. It was decided in 1969 in favour of the administrative authority, VNP being required to seek special authorisation before clearing seedlings more than five years old.

It is unfortunate that this difference of opinion should exist on an issue fundamental to the management of the heath, particularly as an excellent management plan was drawn up in 1969 by the "Niedersächsische Landesverwaltungsamt - Naturschutz und Landschaftspflege" under the authority of the "Regierungspräsident" of Lüneburg who is in charge of nature conservation.

This plan lays down guidelines for landscape planning, the protection of biotopes and education of the public, etc. and has been approved by all parties concerned with the management of the NSG.

Unfortunately, in my opinion, the authors of the plan lay excessive emphasis on landscape aspects as far as conservation of the heath is concerned. For instance, it is considered that birch copses of genuine aesthetic value on the fringes of a heath should be preserved, despite the fact that they scatter a large amount of seed. This is the crux of the problem.

What is the situation on the spot? Only half of the 2,850 hectares of heath currently accessible (1,600 hectares form part of the military training ground) are covered by a satisfactory growth of heather while the other half is fairly densely overgrown by natural birch seedlings.

Consequently, only a quarter of the total heath, i.e. 7% of the entire NSG, is covered by flourishing heather.

This situation is contrary to the main aim of the Lüneburg Heath protected landscape in that the survival of the heath is endangered in many places.

Accordingly, in my opinion, the European Diploma should not be renewed until these threats have been removed.

Remarks

The military training ground

The moors used for manoeuvres by armoured vehicles present a scene of devastation. The ground has been heavily churned up and the vegetation cover destroyed; this leads to severe erosion by wind and water, depending on the season.

In the seriously eroded parts the forest administration is endeavouring to halt the havoc by planting various species of trees, after deep ploughing.

Needless to say, this situation is most regrettable and every effort should be made to provide the British Army with alternative training grounds. These abound in the region - indeed, three large areas, totalling 60,000 hectares, are already used for such purposes in the immediate vicinity of the NSG: North Munster, South Munster and Bergen Hohne.

If the entire training ground cannot be recovered, it should at least be possible to retrieve the moors situated to the east of Bundesstrasse 3.

Although this area is not covered by the European Diploma, the presence of the "Rode Flächen" means that 1,600 hectares of heath, i.e. 36% of the entire heath, are inaccessible. This proportion is enormous in view of the growing numbers of visitors mentioned above. Moreover, noisy manoeuvres are a constant annoyance to both inhabitants and tourists since the sound of the tanks is clearly audible as far as Wilsede when there is a westerly wind.

Education of the public

On account of its interest and the large number of visitors, the Lüneburg Heath ought to have a "Naturmuseum" based on modern lines, retracing the evolution of the botanical landscape and giving a survey of the main varieties of vegetation as well as the characteristic species of flora and fauna.