



Wyre Forest Study Group

Experimental use of pigs to manage woodland in the Wyre Forest

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The domestic pig used agriculturally is arguably the most abused animal. Intelligent, inquisitive, and social, the pig's natural habitat is forest. However, we have either cooped it up indoors in tiny pens or housed it in open fields. With little stimulation the pig is prone to fighting with others and, when outside, left to root up the soil with often devastating results. The result of these management techniques is a stereotype of the pig as a destructive animal, unsuitable for use in nature conservation. This misplacing of the pig by agribusiness has led us to forget the pig as a forest animal and its contribution to woodland diversity both in the form of the wild boar and as a domestic animal turned out for pannage by peasant farmers for centuries.

From a personal perspective, I have worked with domestic pigs on a National Nature Reserve for eight years prior to joining John Iles at the Wyre Community Land Trust and know how valuable an animal the pig can be. I believe passionately in their abilities in woodland management and can see the value of using pigs in the Wyre Forest. After speaking to Natural England, and with the support of John Iles at Unclys Farm, I had an opportunity to trial pigs in the forest, to showcase the pig in woodland management and add to the small but growing body of evidence from sites such as Burnham Beeches, Fairbirch Wood and Langley Woods.

With Natural England's backing, John Iles and I quickly set about organising pigs, with improvements to fencing, provision of water and most importantly a base line survey of the ground flora and a few fixed point photographs. The survey was necessary both to satisfy Natural England with regard to how the pigs perform, and to provide evidence to disseminate to land managers elsewhere. Rosemary Winnall of the Wyre Forest Study Group kindly agreed to carry out a botanical survey of the site beforehand.

The site chosen was ideal as it was dominated by bracken and bramble and had a relatively open tree canopy. The open canopy is an important factor as it allows light to reach the forest floor, thereby creating better conditions for the re-establishment of a diverse range of plants. Three Gloucester Old Spot pigs were turned out in the beginning of July and remained on the site until mid November. Starting the trial in July meant that the pigs were on the land earlier than the traditional pannage period. However for the trial we wanted to ensure there was sufficient time to achieve the desired effects.

We plan to re-engage Rosemary's skills to follow up her first survey to monitor the vegetation in the summer of 2010 and subsequent years. This collated information



Gloucester Old Spot pigs in woodland near Unclys

John Iles



Pig enclosure prior to grazing 17th May 2009

Rosemary Winnall

will provide evidence for Natural England to allow us to continue with the project.

What are the benefits of this process? Managed carefully pigs can achieve a range of outcomes. They can disrupt dense stands of vegetation such as bracken and bramble, create bare patches of ground providing a seed bed for a range of plants, expose dormant seeds that have been covered by layers of leaf litter, create microclimates within relatively small areas and increase the amount of interface between different heights and types of vegetation and with bare ground. These outcomes can be achieved in two ways. First, intensively, as in this experiment where pigs are confined to a small enclosure and may return for a second or even third season. In this situation, the land would then be left to rest and the vegetation allowed to re-establish with a reduction in the dominant species and an increase in diversity. The alternative method would be to use the pigs extensively giving the animals the freedom to roam over a larger area. In such a management system the pigs choose areas to root up and will often favour resource rich hot spots for two or three years, exhausting the supply of food and move on to new areas in subsequent years. The low stocking density of pigs in this scenario would create not a ploughed muddy landscape but a dynamic shifting mosaic of disturbance that promotes regeneration. In both cases, pigs would be turned out in the late summer to early autumn and removed from November to early January

depending on their impact and the available natural resources. Additional feeding is kept to a minimum to maintain health and to help with training and handling.

Most importantly the interactions between the pig and the woodland habitat are almost impossible to replicate using any other form of management. These effects are also ones that are created by an animal that was once part of our woodland landscape and therefore one that woodlands can accommodate well. These benefits also come without the use of herbicide or mechanical management.

This said, it is important not to lose sight of the potential costs of using pigs in woodland management. They do require skills outside those of the woodland manager or forester and so are not always easily transferable. As with any livestock, someone has to be on call 24 hours a day to deal with their welfare. Moreover, there are costs involved in creating a suitable infrastructure (such as fencing and laying on of water). Pigs also need checking daily. All these issues were discussed during a workshop I was asked to host by Natural England for the Grazing Animals Partnership which attracted participants from around the country.

Notwithstanding the costs, my experience leads me to believe in the benefits of this trial and some of the financial costs have already been recouped by the sale of the excellent pork that has been produced.