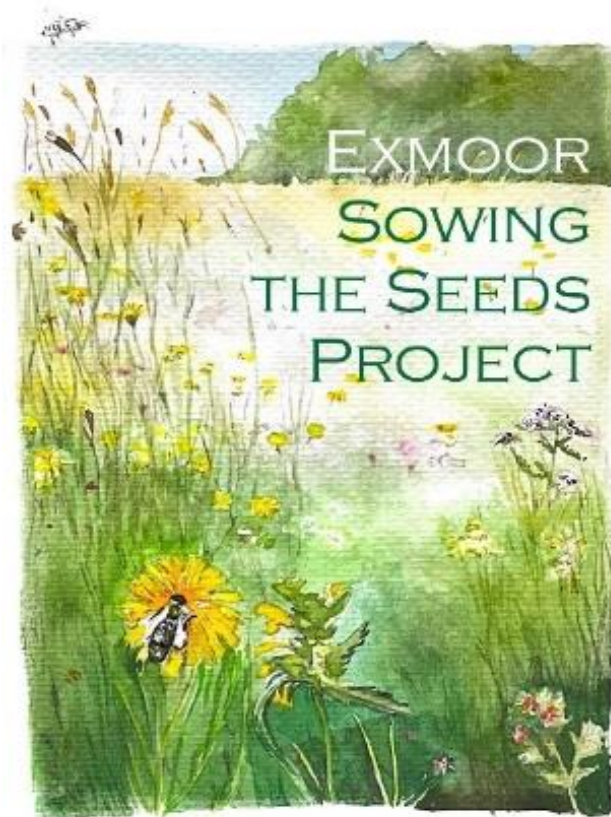


Exmoor Sowing the Seeds Project Update Report

September 2023



WORKING TOGETHER
TO REVIVE AND
RESTORE MEADOW
LANDSCAPES
ACROSS EXMOOR

Project Summary

The *Exmoor Sowing the Seeds* Project has been working to revive and restore meadow landscapes across Exmoor National Park. Funding from FiPL and CareMoor is helping to create a long-term self-sustaining legacy, supporting farming businesses to access funding for nature recovery and diversification, focussing on unimproved grassland, which currently covers just 3.6% of the National Park. The project so far has been supporting 59 landowners, managers, and community groups to restore, rejuvenate, and create wildflower meadows across over 325 hectares. The project is also working with school groups, centres of learning, and communities, on educational and wellbeing activities which deepens our knowledge and connection to meadows.



Background to the Project

Launched in 2021 with funding from CareMoor, South West Water (SWW) and Natural England (NE), The *Exmoor Sowing the Seeds Project* is a collaboration between Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA), Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South West (FWAG SW), Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT), SWW and NE, to revive and restore meadow landscapes across Exmoor.

In 2021, through CareMoor funding, a small pilot was carried out. Working with DWT, a 3-hectare (ha) meadow on a farm near Withypool was harvested and 60kgs of species-rich seed collected. The project funded a vegetation survey of the donor meadow to provide a baseline for future monitoring and potential impacts in species composition post seed-harvesting. A green hay cut was also taken from 1.5 ha of a second meadow on the same farm, which was taken to a meadow within the same parish. The seed was shared with DWT in lieu of time, training and harvesting costs. Five holdings across Exmoor received seed. The CareMoor fund enabled the Project to purchase a brush harvester and vacuum harvester of its own.

Through NE funding and in collaboration with the Devon and Somerset Biodiversity Records Centres, a project to develop a better grassland evidence was completed, increasing understanding of grassland restoration approaches in an Exmoor context, and this led to the development of a grassland inventory for Exmoor National Park.

There was growing interest in the project at all levels from farm-scale to community participation, and this demonstrated that the project needed to be upscaled from the small-scale pilot.



The Project in 2022:

The project was successful in applying for a grant from the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme, enabling the work to expand and continue to March 2024.

12 farmers, contractors and landowners were trained to use the harvesting equipment for meadow restoration.

ENPA staff and a local contractor (who had attended the brush harvester training) harvested **110kgs** of seed from a 3.5 ha species-rich Exmoor meadow. Once dried and prepared, the seed was distributed to **14 recipients** comprising 6 farm businesses, 5 small holdings, 1 school, 1 community area and 1 churchyard, restoring 22 ha of grassland and 'mini meadow' areas.

44 landowners and managers engaged with the project comprising 24 farm businesses, 15 small holdings and 5 community groups.

An Exmoor landowner generously cultivated plug plants, to further enrich recipient meadows. 100 oxeye daisies were grown and distributed amongst meadow owners and community groups.

Black knapweed and field scabious seed was gathered by FWAG SW and another trained local contractor, from 0.4 ha of a species-rich meadow near Exford. Some of the seed was distributed to the 2022 recipients and some has been retained to be propagated.



Brush harvester collection at the donor meadow in 2022



Seed sieving in the 2022 harvest.



Exmoor Sowing the Seeds Project 2022

12 contractors, farmers & landowners trained to use the harvester

The project purchased:
1 brush harvest
1 vacuum harvester

Black knapweed & Devils bit scabious seed retained for plug plants in spring 2023

100 ox-eye daisy plug plants grown

Full-time Project Officer funded by FiPL for 14 months

110kg seed harvested from 3.5ha

14 recipients

22ha meadows restored

44 land managers engaged

With thanks to project partners:

- South West Water
- FWAG SouthWest
- NATURAL ENGLAND
- Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs
- Farming in Protected Landscapes programme
- EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK
- CareMoor for Exmoor
- Devon Wildlife Trust
- Upstream Thinking

Poster courtesy of FWAG SW.

The Project in 2023:

A full-time Meadows Project Officer, Lucy Cornwall, was employed for February 2023-March 2024.

A Teagle straw chopper was purchased for use and loan to trained landowners/managers to utilise green hay in meadow restoration.

A salt spreader was purchased to use for seed sowing in meadow restoration, and a trailer for transporting equipment to meadows.

The project has been supporting landowners to restore existing grasslands, as well as creating new meadow areas, which is providing support and advice for over 325 ha of land across the National Park.

We will continue to provide ongoing support to our meadow owners as their grasslands develop.





Project officer carrying out a botanical survey

The project team is undertaking detailed botanical surveys of grasslands, surveying the meadows previously seeded to report success of seed growth.

We are surveying new grasslands designated for meadow restoration to assess the vegetation and develop a baseline for future monitoring.

We have been carrying out soil testing to determine the suitability for wildflower establishment. Soil and botanical survey results will inform management decisions and contribute to the grasslands inventory.



Project officer carrying out soil sampling

We will continue to monitor grasslands and contribute to biological data records on grassland wildlife across Exmoor.

The project is continuing to work with community groups and centres of learning to develop our knowledge of meadows. We have been in communications with the National Wildflower Centre and Eden Project Learning to discuss potential research opportunities for students regarding wildflower meadows.

We have harvested approximately **160 kg of meadow seed** from three species rich meadows on Exmoor, with aims to **restore 32 ha** of grasslands, alongside providing management advice to enhance existing meadows. We are vacuum harvesting seeds of specific meadow species to build a supply for propagation at the wildflower nursery, and for potential research work by centres of learning.



Vacuum harvesting





Harvesting wildflower seed

We are continuing to collaborate with our partner organisations such as DWT and FWAG SW, and working with the National Trust, The Exmoor Society, and other organisations, on meadow restoration projects.

To date, we are working with an additional **15 new holdings**, bringing it to a total of **59 landowners and managers**, by providing detailed botanical and soil surveys which then inform management plans which the Project prepares for each recipient meadow owner. The Project will also provide continuing support through ongoing visits and advice as the meadows develop.

The Project is running a series of workshops and events designed to inspire and inform people about meadows. So far, **122 people** have attended or booked onto the events.

These have comprised wellbeing events such as botanical drawing and writing, plus technical skills courses including scything and botanical monitoring.



The botanical drawing class, using natural pigments, collected locally.



Talk at the National Meadows Day event in collaboration with The Exmoor Society and FWAG SW.



One of our meadow owners learning to scythe on our scything course taught by Somerset Scythe School.

The project has been working with a local school to develop a meadow area, working with pupils to sow meadow seeds in autumn then to plant the germinated seeds, creating a meadow area in the playground.



We are providing support and guidance to the school on how to maintain this area. We held wildflower identification workshops with two school groups at the Pinkery Outdoor Education Centre, and will be continuing to develop our involvement in educational activities with school groups at Pinkery.

We are in the process of setting up a wildflower nursery to grow more plants to enrich meadows and become a community growing hub. This will be an important resource for propagating meadow plant species such as devils-bit scabious, which benefits from nursery propagation.

The project has now secured funding until March 2025, so we will continue to work with communities across Exmoor to create and restore species-rich grasslands, and look to inspire an appreciation of our valuable meadow habitats.



Talk at the National Meadows Day at Exmoor



Brush harvester demonstrations at the National Meadows Day event.

