

Plantlife

save our
**magnificent
meadows**



Action now for
species-rich
grasslands

Hay festival?

It took around 6,000 years to create the species-rich grassland for which the UK is globally famous.

Yet in less than a century we have lost 97%

And counting...

Species-rich grassland is different to the bright green, intensively-farmed grassland that covers nearly half of the UK.

For a start it's now rare, covering less than 1% of UK land. Yet these remaining isolated fragments are home to an unprecedented richness of species; hundreds of different wild flowers and fungi have co-evolved over millennia with farmers managing the land as hay meadows and pasture. This unparalleled plant diversity provides the life support for our invertebrates, birds, mammals.

Stand in a field of intensively-farmed grassland and, despite the apparent lushness at your feet, barely any life will be evident. No movement, no sound, no colour.

Stand in a meadow in midsummer and the hum of life around you is almost overwhelming: bees, butterflies, birdsong, and colour..



This Action Plan isn't a nostalgic yearning for a hazy vision of yesteryear, it's about investing in our most exciting and biodiverse grasslands - our natural capital - to realise the multitude of benefits they provide:

- Grassland soils contribute to **carbon sequestration**, with acid grasslands and dry grassy heaths outperforming habitats like woodlands.
- Flower-rich floodplain meadows have more absorbent soils, so capture and **hold back floodwaters** more effectively than improved grassland.
- Flower-rich grasslands support **greater numbers and diversity of pollinating species than other habitats**. Proximity to semi-natural grasslands increases predator control of agricultural pests.
- A fifth of all **priority species** for conservation action are associated with grassland habitats.
- Biodiverse grasslands **lock up more pollutants** thereby reducing impacts to air and water.
- Species-rich pasture and hay benefit grazing livestock, providing **a wider range of minerals and amino acids** than intensive pasture, resulting in healthier animals and healthier food.
- Surviving meadows are **key landscape features** like ancient woodlands
- The colour and wildlife of meadows enrich our lives giving a deep-rooted sense of **well being**.

Created by the Save Our Magnificent Meadows partnership, led by Plantlife, this is a clarion call to protect, love and restore our meadows and species-rich grassland against the creeping normality that they no longer matter.

How have we lost 7.5 million acres of meadows since the 1930s ?

Unprotected and easily destroyed, 97% of our species-rich grassland has been sprayed, ploughed, fertilized and re-seeded. This is a key driver in the high-profile declines of pollinators and birds and a loss to us all. Surviving lowland meadows are typically small and isolated and are not adequately protected by existing measures such as planning legislation. The few surviving larger areas of species-rich grassland, are being eaten away and fragmented by increasing intensification and changing land use. For our vast upland areas, the changes are driven by a loss of mixed farming and agricultural practices that have increased the intensity of land management. Even those designated a SSSI/SSI are not always protected and remain vulnerable to damage, mismanagement and habitat loss.

Mismanaged – for meadows and species-rich grasslands afforded no statutory protection the outlook is bleak, with nearly 80% suffering from neglect. With most farmed grasslands locked into prescribed and uniform management regimes, we have lost the variety of past management and the resilience to environmental change that this secured and, with it, some of our most characteristic species. We need to target remaining species-rich grasslands with more flexible management and develop measures to expand and link isolated sites, preferably by the reinstatement of natural dynamic processes such as the movement of livestock.

Undervalued – to the untrained eye and for much of the year, meadows and species-rich grasslands can look much like other fields. It is only in the summer months that they reveal themselves in all their glory. Unlike our local woodlands, we are not so aware of local meadows we can visit. As they have disappeared from our landscapes and everyday lives, we've lost that magical experience that wildflower grasslands provide – a nature deficit disorder that sterile fields fail to counter. We are also much less conscious when they are being destroyed. We notice when a wood is being felled but not when a field is being ploughed... Species-rich grassland with undisturbed floral histories going back generations can be lost in a single afternoon. As our memories fade of what was, so does our appreciation of their High Nature Value – be it the recuperative powers such diverse swards offer grazing animals, or the ability of floodplain meadows to emerge from winter flooding with a carpet of flowers.



The future of species-rich grassland?

The Government's 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment articulates an ambition to create or restore 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat.

The good news is that no habitat is richer in wildlife than species-rich grassland.

That's why it's called species-rich...

Plantlife and the Save Our Magnificent Meadows partnership are already restoring species-rich grassland across the UK and leading a step-change in the nation's understanding with National Meadows Day fast becoming a focus for activities.

Save Our Magnificent Meadows has become a hub for advice and guidance with many local communities, farmers and landowners enthusiastically taking up the banner to manage and restore meadows.

With more effective regulatory regimes and better targeted support mechanisms, we can go even further.

We urge government to hold to their ambition and seize this 'opportunity to strengthen and enhance the protections our countryside and wildlife habitats enjoy.'

Six Steps to transform the future of the UK's meadows and species-rich grasslands

PROTECT

The last surviving 3% of meadows.

1 A national inventory

Identifying remaining meadows and species-rich grasslands is a critical first step to developing a network of sites for recovery. **We call for** a comprehensive inventory to sit alongside our Ancient Woodland Inventory to better protect our remaining sites and enable new mechanisms, such as conservation covenants, to ensure no net loss of our natural capital.

2 Legal protection

We call for improved environmental legislation, land use policies and statutory regulations, post Brexit, to ensure protection from agricultural intensification, habitat destruction, abandonment, land use change and pollution.

RESTORE

Species-rich grassland is currently at less than 1% of UK land cover. Restoring 120,000 ha is an ambitious target but is only a 0.5% increase, compared to current woodland afforestation targets which stand at 12%. Ambitious but reasonable.

3 120Kha by 2043

We call for sustainable land management support to maintain and restore **more** species-rich grasslands; establish plans to reverse fragmentation by restoring **larger** areas of grassland and utilise new mechanisms such as 'net gain'.

4 Natural seeding

Species-rich grassland offer us the seeds of recovery. **We call for** natural seeding techniques to protect the local character of our grassland sites and improve their resilience to environmental change.

LOVE

Flower-rich grasslands are iconic features of our landscape and shared cultural imagination and have long been celebrated in science, art and literature.

5 Support local action

Provide communities with the knowledge, mechanisms and support to improve the wildlife and cultural value of their local grassland by supporting local grazing schemes and sustainable rural enterprises to ensure the benefits are realised by local communities.

6 Celebrate

National Meadows Day reconnects us with our heritage and the sheer wonder of species-rich meadows. The benefits to society, the economy and our environment provided by meadows and grasslands are something to value and celebrate.



HRH The Prince Of Wales is our Patron

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Save Our Magnificent Meadows was the UK's largest partnership project transforming the fortunes of vanishing wildflower meadows, grasslands and wildlife. Led by Plantlife, the partnership was made up of 11 organisations, and was supported thanks to National Lottery players.

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