4010 Northern Atlantic wet heaths with *Erica tetralix*

Management of Natura 2000 habitats. Summary

Heathland in New Forest, UK, including Northern Atlantic wet heaths. This site is grazed by ponies and cattle. Photo: Steve Humble.

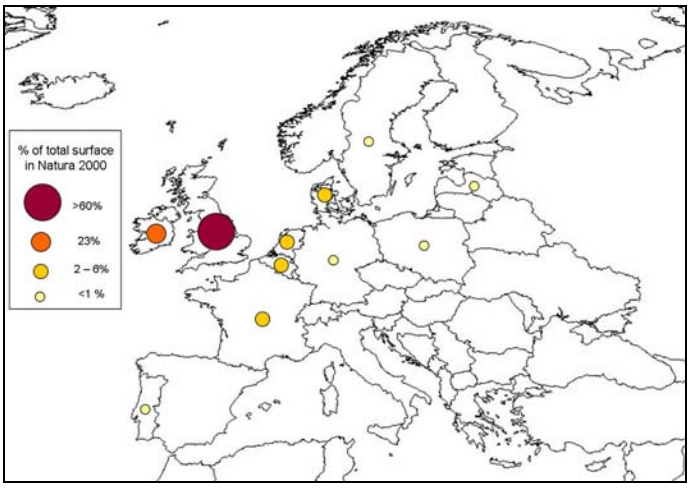
North Atlantic wet heath is a natural or more commonly semi-natural habitat of humid, peaty or semi-peaty character. The habitat is dominated by dwarf shrub species and usually occurs on acidic, nutrient-poor substrates, such as shallow peats (<0.5m) or sandy soils with impeded drainage. Wet heath generally has a water table that is above or at ground level for at least some of the year. The community includes mixtures of *Erica tetralix* (cross-leaved heath), *Trichophorum cespitosus* (deer grass), *Calluna vulgaris* (heather) and *Molinia caerulea* (purple moor-grass), and in some cases over an under-storey of mosses, often including carpets of *Sphagnum* species (bog mosses).

The community is restricted in its distribution to the Atlantic fringe between Scandinavia and Normandy. The majority of the wet heath resource in the EU is in the UK and Ireland (85%) and it spans upland (up to 600m) and lowland altitudes (below 300m). In the UK wet heath is usually found in the wetter climates of the north and west, and in Sweden it is restricted to regions with similar climate conditions in south-western parts of the country. These areas tend to have relatively high rainfall (generally between 60 to 110 cm per year) and more importantly, an even spread of rainfall throughout the year,

Wet heath is thought to be a naturally occurring community with interaction between species formed over millions of years by abiotic factors such as climate and soil conditions. Conditions such as soil acidity, low nutrient status and waterlogged conditions, and possibly grazing from large herbivores may have arrested succession to woodland, resulting in the maintenance of an open dwarf shrub community.

Its present variability is however related to human activities. The open heathland complex found across Europe is due to agricultural practices such as domestic grazing, burning, turf collection and cutting, which began to be developed around 6000 years ago.

Traditional forms of management remain a key requirement for the maintenance of wet heath within a wider heathland complex. These practices combine to stop succession to woodland once areas were cleared; with balanced grazing as the main management concept while additional or complementary measures such as controlled burning or cutting are recommended to be applied much more restrictively.



Percentage distribution of the total surface of Northern Atlantic wet heaths in Natura 2000

The complete text of the document is available at:
http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/best_practice_en.htm

Management of Natura 2000 habitats is a project launched by the European Commission in January 2007 aimed at defining best practices for management of habitat types included in Annex I of the Habitat Directive (92/43/EEC) that need active recurring management. Twenty six habitat types that are representative of different bio-geographical regions have been considered.