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**CONSERVATION MATTERS:  
A REVIEW OF HERP CONSERVATION ISSUES IN THE NEWS  
DURING THE PERIOD JULY TO NOVEMBER 1988**

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**Controversy over Canford Heath Development has serious implications for reptile conservation in Britain**

The BHS is one of the main protagonists in a fierce, and increasingly bitter, dispute over the controversial development of Canford Heath in Dorset. Formerly the largest single lowland heath in Britain, some 60% of its 2000 acres (over 800ha) has already been destroyed by the building of more than 7000 houses, together with the roads, roundabouts and superstores that serve them. This is the result of Poole Borough Council's local development plan which has now been in progress for 15 years. Since the beginning of the 19th century the amount of heathland in Dorset has been reduced from over 75000 acres (30400ha) to less than 14000 acres (5660ha). Most now survives as scattered fragments, more vulnerable and less able to support viable populations of rare species than large heathland blocks, hence the national importance of Canford Heath as a wildlife habitat. It is estimated that Dorset heathland is home to 90% of the Sand Lizards (*Lacerta agilis*) and 80% of the Smooth Snakes (*Coronella austriaca*) remaining in Britain, although less than a fifth is protected as nature reserves.

The destruction of heathland in Europe has been even greater than in this country and it is now regarded as an internationally rare habitat type. This is recognised in the provisions of the Berne Convention and the 1979 EC Birds Directive, as well as our own Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. The latter also provides "full" protection for the Sand Lizard and Smooth Snake, whose British populations are without doubt highly endangered. That the development of Canford Heath, based on 15 year old local planning decisions, has been allowed to continue entirely legally has highlighted inadequacies in current British Wildlife legislation.

More than 85% of the heathland remaining in Dorset has been notified by the Nature Conservancy Council as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Legal loopholes exist in this protection, however, and appropriate management agreements cannot be forced onto land owners who, if hostile to conservation, can let heathland degenerate to the extent that it loses its scientific value and must be denotified. Planning permission for a site effectively overrides the Wildlife and Countryside Act and it is also permissible to kill rare reptiles and other species unknowingly, e.g. with a bulldozer. Dorset now has the dubious distinction of being the county with the largest number of SSSIs damaged in the last three years.

In addition, conservationists have been strongly critical of the NCC for never even having notified large areas of Canford Heath as an SSSI for purely political reasons. The boundaries of the present SSSI on north Canford Heath, not drawn until 1985 when much development had already occurred, do not include land earmarked by Poole Borough Council for development. This is despite the confirmed scientific value (i.e. of SSSI quality) of parts of the heath which are now legally unprotected. NCC say they have drawn the boundaries realistically since SSSI status will not protect such sites from existing planning permission (which in some cases has been granted by Poole Borough Council to itself).

The BHS Conservation Officer, Keith Corbett, has been primarily concerned with trying to save two key reptile sites, of 23 acres (9.3ha) and 3.9 acres (1.6ha), outside the SSSI boundary. Both are on the south facing scarp of Canford Heath and are therefore of far greater value to reptiles than the north side, which has received SSSI notification. Poole Borough Council refuse to come to a compromise over these sites, which even the developers, Clarke Homes, are willing to do. Legal action in the European Court aside, the only option left open to the BHS could eventually be to rescue the doomed animals, if time for this is allowed, and move them to safer sites. This practice, a very poor alternative to actually conserving heathland,



Plate 2. Juvenile Smooth Snake (*Coronella austriaca*) photographed on Dorset heathland during the BHS Conservation Committee's four year C.A.T. survey.

Photo: Paul Edgar

has already taken place at a number of Canford Heath sites in 1988. One volunteer alone, Doug Mills, rescued 3460 reptiles and amphibians from 15 doomed sites (not all were on Canford Heath since this is by no means the only Dorset heath being developed). This total included 91 sand lizards, an estimated 2% of the entire British population. His efforts were well publicised by the local and national media and served to draw attention to the plight of Dorset's heathlands. Many other conservation bodies have also expressed their concern publicly, notably groups like the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) who recognise the international importance of heathland.

Poole Borough Council and the developers have responded angrily in the media to attacks by conservationists and local residents who they say are "misinformed". People already living on Canford Heath, who have protested about continued development, have been branded hypocrites for trying to stop people living on the heath (since everyone in Britain lives on former wildlife habitats this presumably means that nobody has the right to be concerned about conservation). Councillors claim that the north of Canford Heath SSSI, an area of some 800 acres (324ha), only survives because of protectionist policies contained in the original development plan. The Council recently failed to acquire this land for itself and it is now owned by developers and gravel extractors W.H. White & Co. Ltd. The latter have established a wardened reserve on the site but conservationists claim that development is still planned for parts of the remaining heath, and say that nothing at all will be left to the south of the main ridge.

Perhaps, though, it is not surprising that the local council and developers have taken offence to the furore of criticism about the development of Canford Heath. They are providing houses and jobs, as well as making a lot of money, in one of the fastest growing conurbations in Britain. Poole now has a population of about 126,000 with a 16000 increase in the past 14 years. The fact that some of the country's most precious wildlife habitat, home to several of our rarest species (a source of surprise to some of the developers) is destroyed in the process, is considered to be a necessary sacrifice to progress. After all the development has been entirely legal in British Law, and the council and developers have been able to exploit the lack of

real protection for heathland to their advantage. The controversy created has been treated largely as a local issue – along the lines of “Conservationists Battle to Save Village Green”. Heathland development in Dorset is affecting the local countryside and quality of life for residents, destroying the very thing many people move to the area to enjoy, but, more importantly, it is a prime example of Britain ignoring its international conservation responsibilities.

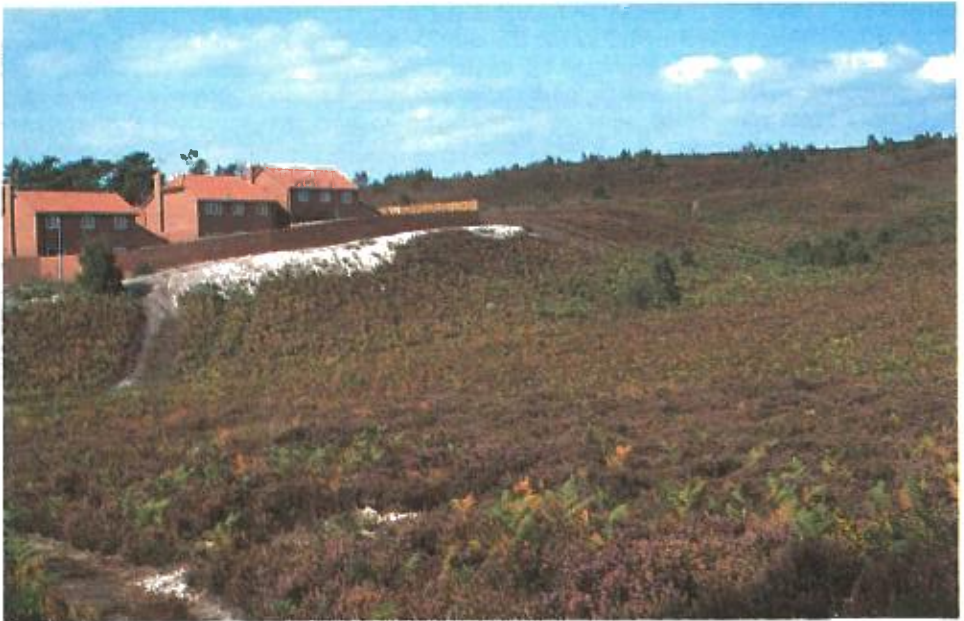
Legal action in the European Court, brought by the BHS and other conservation groups, seems likely if Poole Borough Council refuse to compromise over key wildlife sites targeted for development on Canford Heath. This action will challenge the effectiveness of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, alleging breaches of EC directives which the Act was designed to enforce. Although the present government is trying to win the green vote it is also blocking new European directives which, among other things, would close the damaging loopholes in the Wildlife and Countryside Act and guarantee absolute, legally enforceable protection for the remaining heathland, and its assemblage of rare species, which is still being destroyed in Britain and if things do not improve soon the future of the Sand Lizard and Smooth Snake as British species will start to look very grim indeed.

### **Natterjack research project**

The NCC are funding a 3 year research project to investigate the behaviour and ecology of adult and juvenile Natterjack Toads (*Bufo calamita*), following previous work on tadpole ecology. The research is based at Sussex University and from here Trevor Beebee and Jonathan Denton aim to study the toads on inland heathland sites, coastal dunes and saltmarshes.

### **Marwell Zoo rare herps breeding and release project**

The BHS Conservation Committee are expending their captive breeding facilities for Sand Lizards and Natterjack Toads by establishing two large outdoor vivaria at Marwell Zoological Park near Winchester. These vivaria are off-exhibit and will be operational in 1989, augmenting the stock already bred by Conservation Committee members. Captive bred animals will be released, following NCC guidelines, on suitably managed heathland sites in southern England.



**Plate 3.** Canford Heath, Poole, Dorset. Taken near Culliford Crescent looking north west towards the scarp. This photograph shows the northern limits of building on Canford Heath in September 1988. The small valley to the right of the houses, which are in Marchwood Avenue, is under threat from further development. Readers are invited to find this site in 1989 and compare the view then to this photograph.

Photo: Paul Edgar

In particular the Forestry Commission is being extremely co-operative in preparing sites in the New Forest for the release of Sand Lizards bred at Marwell, in addition to those bred by Commission personnel. Vivarium construction has been funded by the Marwell Oryx Club and the Marwell Preservation Trust Ltd. The project will be self-financing in the future, with a public display planned to explain herp conservation to the 250,000 visitors Marwell Zoo receives annually. For more information about the project please contact the author of this article.

#### **Conservation Committee Land Fund**

The Conservation Committee Land Fund (see BHS Bulletin No. 20, Summer 1987) now stands at £3070, enough to cover all existing BHS heathland leases from the interest alone. Further donations to increase the capital will enable important sites to be purchased. BHS members wishing to donate money to the Land Fund should make cheques payable to "B. Banks (re BHS)" and send them to Brian Banks, Nature Conservancy Council, The Old Candlemakers, West Street, Lewes, Sussex. Any fund-raising ideas would also be very welcome.

We should like to thank the following people for their donations to the Land Fund:- BHS Education Committee, BHS North West England Group, BTCV South East Region, Dr. Baksh, B. Banks, D. Bird, J. Buckley, K. Corbett, P. Edgar, C. Fitzsimmons, R. Griffiths, Hastings Natural History Society, G.A.D. and E.H. Haslewood, M. Langford, Mrs. C. Palmer, Portsmouth Reptile and Amphibian Society, R. Stevens, RSPB Potters Bar, P. Reynolds, J. Rudge, W. Whitaker and the late Mrs. Cynthia Ruxton.