

Richmond Park Grazing Trial

by Adam Curtis, Assistant Manager, Richmond Park

Grazing with traditional beef cattle has been proven to improve the floral diversity of grassland on a number of nature reserves across the UK. Cows nibble back rough, dominating grasses, allowing greater varieties of delicate species to find their own niche. Cows were known to have roamed Richmond Park at least until 1943, and it is thought that their absence has contributed to the decline of species diversity of the grassland. So in 2008 a trial grazing project was started to determine if this might be an appropriate management technique for the Park.



In the initial year, 2008, just two cows (British White x Gloucester) grazed a 4-hectare paddock near Holly Lodge from January to June. The area was left for the summer to allow flowering. In the second year, starting in October 2008, three cows returned for a longer grazing period. The first year was intentionally under-stocked as animal welfare and public acceptance were vital. The cows were very happy with their new residence and an abundance of food, while members of the public had nothing but positive comments for the change to their favourite walking routes.

Botanical surveys indicate that the second year's grazing is having a positive effect on the grassland, although it's far too early to

prove anything meaningful. The grass looks less dense, whilst the cows are still finding plenty of forage. The intention is to continue winter to spring grazing for five years before making a final evaluation.

Animal welfare will always be the highest priority. The cows are checked daily and water is provided constantly, though providing supplementary feed would be counter-productive as this would gradually increase soil fertility, which has an adverse effect on species diversity. We did make one small exception during the very cold weather early in 2009 and allowed the cows to have a few bales of hay to comfort them on the coldest nights.

The cows will remain until they have eaten all the grass required or the grazier needs them elsewhere. Low numbers of traditional breeds will always be used to ensure that enough palatable forage is available.