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MANAGING PROGRESS THROUGH FARMER NETWORKS: EXMOOR HILL FARMING NETWORK, UK

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Abstract:

The nature and development of Farming Networks is briefly reviewed giving consideration to their pros and cons. Their role in enabling farmers to deliver wider Ecosystem Security on a landscape scale for public benefit and due reward is proposed. Ecosystem Security includes food, water, energy, carbon capture, landscape maintenance, farm livelihoods, and ultimately the stability of Society. The paper indicates substantial advantages through Farming Networks for improving farm management on each participant holding. The case of the Exmoor Hill Farming Network (EHFN) is considered from its history through its precursor organisation, The Exmoor Hill Farm Project (EHFP), and its subsequent range of activities. These have included significant formation of various Farmer Groups within EHFN. Farmer perceptions of the value of EHFN are reported together with recommendations for future activities. The possible Constitution and practice of EHFN is given brief consideration. The use of Farming Networks in strategic management is advocated for international implementation. It is stressed that such Farming Networks must be voluntarily embraced and run by farmers themselves, rather than imposed by other agencies for their convenience or in any way to erode farmer sovereignty in the management of farming.

Keywords: *Farmers, Networks, Groups, Uplands, Management, Information*

Introduction

It has long been recognised that farmers tend to meet together less than is in their best interests to do (Mosher, 1966), and yet farmers everywhere prefer to learn from other innovative practical farmers (Kyamuwendu & Wibberley, 2011). Groups of farmers have been formed or have arisen with a number of original purposes: some to cheapen extension delivery; some to achieve co-operation in buying inputs, in using/sharing equipment, and/or in processing/selling farm outputs; some to farm together in an organised way; some to lobby policy-makers. If the purpose for a group's initial

formation is mutual learning/education about practical farm management, such a group can endure through becoming farmer-owned and may deliver sustainable, farmer-interactive extension in practice. The Cotswold Arable Study Group has been working constructively together for forty years now since its inception in 1977 (Wibberley, 1988). Those who learn together may later come to earn together. Networking of farmers in a region can provide critical mass for both their own livelihood sustenance and for improved management to deliver public benefit on a landscape scale, which merits proper financial reward for farmers. However, they can be more cumbersome to administer than farmers' groups and need such sub-groups within their structure to enable progress and scale relational groups to address issues together. Ecosystem Security includes food, water, energy, carbon capture, landscape maintenance, farm livelihoods, conservation of culture, and ultimately the stability of Society. Proper farming and land management financial rewards for ecosystem security delivery need to emerge in future. Networks are arising among farmers in various regions of the UK (see Rose Regeneration, 2013, for an overview) and this paper focuses on one operating in Exmoor. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by the Exmoor Hill Farming Network, North Devon+ or the Exmoor National Park Authority.

The background context

Historic concern for the future of hill farming on Exmoor has persisted within the past half century and before (Sinclair, 1966; Porchester, 1977; Orwin *et al*, 1997; Lobley *et al*, 2004). Schemes to address upland well-being have been explored elsewhere in the UK, including Wales (Banks & Marsden, 2000) and Cumbria (Humphries, 2015). A comparative approach was tested in Bowland, Lancashire and Bodmin Moor, Cornwall (Garforth & Wibberley, 1999). The present paper focuses on Exmoor within the south-west of England. The South-West English Uplands – much visited by tourists - comprise notably the National Parks of Dartmoor (in Devon), Exmoor (in Devon and Somerset), and the Bodmin Moor Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in Cornwall – a combined area of some 73,800 hectares, including 34,000 hectares of internationally important moorland (Waldon, 2008). These SW uplands also contain some 10% of England's scheduled monuments and prehistoric landscapes dating back some 6,000 years. Furthermore, it has been estimated that ecosystem services from the SW uplands include peaty soils which store an estimated 85 million tonnes of CO₂-equivalent, plus

provision of drinking water for some 1.6 million residents and 8 million annual visitors to the region (Waldon, 2008). Future work may usefully compare and contrast other cases of farmer-led networking but space precludes that here.

Turner & Wibberley (2009) noted that “public support for hill farming systems represents a form of ‘transfer payments’, a redistribution of income via the Exchequer from UK and EU taxpayers to hill farmers. Under the new policy rationale in 2009, they are in effect payments for the provision of public goods, broadly understood in the case of hill farming to include environment, countryside, wildlife habitats, and an array of services including recreational uses and water supply. It is arguable that to this list should be added the continuation of a distinctive farming way-of-life that, if left to the market alone, might disappear largely or even completely over time.” There was increasing concern that the special disadvantages faced by hill farmers, which arise because of the uniquely difficult farming conditions in which they operate, have not been fully reflected in the future level of support payments proposed (Turner et al, 2008; SAC, 2008). In this context, the Exmoor Hill Farm Project began in 2009.

History of the Exmoor Hill Farming Network (EHFN)

The Exmoor Hill Farming Network (EHFN) was preceded and established through the Exmoor Hill Farm Project (EHFP) which offered services to farmers and their businesses on Exmoor from 2009 to the end of 2013, with support from the British Government (Defra) via Exmoor National Park (ENP) and EU support via the RDPE (Rural Development Programme England). Those services sought to be relevant in terms of training, extension and networking. The Exmoor Hill Farm Project was one of three set up through Defra RDPE monies - a similar uplands project was run in other South West Upland areas (Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor). Space precludes a comparative study here but merits future investigation.

The EHFP provided linkages and assistance in accessing whatever help was also available from possible sources within Exmoor, dispelling some bureaucratic barriers and adopting a ‘can do’ approach. The EHFP Steering Group, chaired by one of the authors, developed a good spirit of cooperation among farmer members and the agencies and people that wish to help the cause of livestock-based farm business/livelihood improvement on

Exmoor. The EHFP sought to contribute towards Exmoor's land and livelihoods being managed more sustainably. The EHFP was run by a job-sharing team of two, ably backed by part-time administrative help. The EHFP catalysed Farmers' Groups, organised practically relevant training events, and a field visits programme, as well as linking people to grant schemes and technical advice as those arose. EHFP funds were overseen diligently through North Devon+. North Devon+ was used as a host organisation not only to be the employer host but also to provide a cashflow solution for the network when the farmers decided they wanted to carry on after EHFP funding ceased. This oversight has been continued under the same agency to date. The EHFP achieved considerable land area coverage within the target zone of Exmoor, and a farmer client contact list of over 700, though far fewer engaged with it. This 'reach' was only possible through collaboration with other interested organisations and individuals, and by effective communication at events such as the various Exmoor Local Shows, Auctions, and via a crisp, concise but informative periodic Newsletter. The Exmoor Hill Farming Network (EHFN – Fig.1) was established in January 2014 with an initial contact list of 150, with a new Coordinator and chaired by a farmer - the other author, to follow on and develop this foundational work of EHFP. The EHFN seeks to continue to be as accessible as possible to farmers and to implement their ideas and feed their concerns and realities back to policymakers and other organisations that provide various services via Exmoor farmers and land managers. This includes liaison with the Exmoor National Park Authority, The Exmoor Society and the rented accommodation offered by Exmoor Farmers Livestock Auctions HQ at Cutcombe Market, where EHFN office is situated. This paper explores the experience of EHFN over its first full three years of operation since it succeeded to the foundational work of EHFP over its five-year existence. It presents feedback from a small sample of actively-engaged farmers and their aspirations for future activity.

Fig.1. Logo of Exmoor Hill Farming Network – purple to denote the prized heather!

www.exmoorhillfarmingnetwork.org.uk



EHFN Activities during 2014-2016

A wide range of activities have been accomplished during the first three years of EHFN operation. The Prince's Countryside Fund (PCF) supported EHFN work 'to improve viability, efficiency and sustainability of Exmoor Farming Businesses through knowledge transfer, training, information sharing, co-operation, peer group support, safeguarding farming businesses, promoting rural employment and improving land management'. This was in line with the overall PCF objective to '*improve the viability of British Farming, targeting areas of greatest need*'. In connection with these goals, EHFN has recruited new members, arranged numerous training activities, many communications and discussion groups. Many Exmoor farming businesses have been assisted by the EHFN Officer with both direct guidance and signposting to other sources of help. New stakeholders have been linked to the network and over 60 young people engaged in activities, training and events. It is the aim to link some of them to work placements. Many communications have been sent out relevant to emerging farming issues in order to inform widely about EHFN help, and including a vibrant post-Brexit event well-attended in autumn 2016. New financial sponsors have been secured and an encouragingly large number of partner/industry links established. Overall, many training, discussion, information and visit events have been arranged attracting an average of 10-12 attendees on each occasion.

The continuance of a viable and encouraged/enabled farming community on Exmoor has benefitted not only the rural economy and communities but also visitors who enjoy sustainable tourism development in Exmoor's farming-tended landscapes. This may be particularly poignant in this UN Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. ENPA has supported all the above aims and activities, together with enabling rigorous economic analysis of Exmoor farming's viability, including scrutiny of beef and lamb prices, trends and new markets – in conjunction with condition scoring and carcass inspection. The ENPA is interested in the engagement of EHFN and its members with wider National Park purposes of conservation (including wildlife), access, education (including archaeological interpretation) and public enjoyment as well as in the socio-economic well-being of farmers and farming communities on Exmoor. To that end, ENPA has welcomed the role of EHFN in signposting its members towards agri-environment scheme applications and changes in agricultural policy. All EHFN's work has reflected the above objectives and outcomes.

Since its inception, The Exmoor Hill Farming Network has provided crucial support to over 430 members, and growing, across Exmoor. It has engaged with 226 farm businesses and provided locally delivered training in many topics through a huge number of events, from sheep nutrition to computer training, from sprayer training to accounting. Events can be roughly categorised into training, information/educational and legislative events. Training events carried out have included first aid, trailer licence, computer training, book-keeping, accounting. Information/educational events held have included grassland management, ram MOT (analogous to Ministry of Transport annual vehicle-testing). Legislative events organised have included various pesticide application training sessions, rodenticides training, and transportation of livestock,

Within the network, three discussion groups are operated: The Forward Farming Group, The Women In Farming Group and The Micro Farming Group. The Forward Farming Group, consists of some 15 Exmoor farmers, who are interested in visiting other farming businesses or connected businesses, as well as hearing speakers who come to give presentations. In 2016, visits included one to a farmer who maintains a very efficient beef and lamb finishing farm as well as a diversification into machinery selling enterprise. Another visit was to see a farmer who has started intensive rotational grazing, which is the norm for dairy farms, but less so for sheep. An indoor poultry unit visit contrasted with the experience of our typical membership of sheep and beef farmers. A very informative guided tour around a large beef and lamb processor was held. Another visit was to see the expansion taking place at a local livestock identification and equipment supply company. An Exmoor farmer who has diversified into ice cream production and sales illustrated another niche market. Yet another visit was to an extremely well run dairy farm, breeding Ayrshire cattle. A particularly interesting visit was a trip to Cheltenham to see a friend of many of the group members, who has moved off Exmoor to run a big sheep enterprise, predominantly grazing extreme environmental-schemed land.

The Micro Farming Group has 30 members on its distribution list. In 2016, the group attended a lambing preparation evening, a show sheep preparation event, made an insightful visit to a North Devon coastal farm to see the unique challenges faced there, and made a tour around an early lambing sheep enterprise.

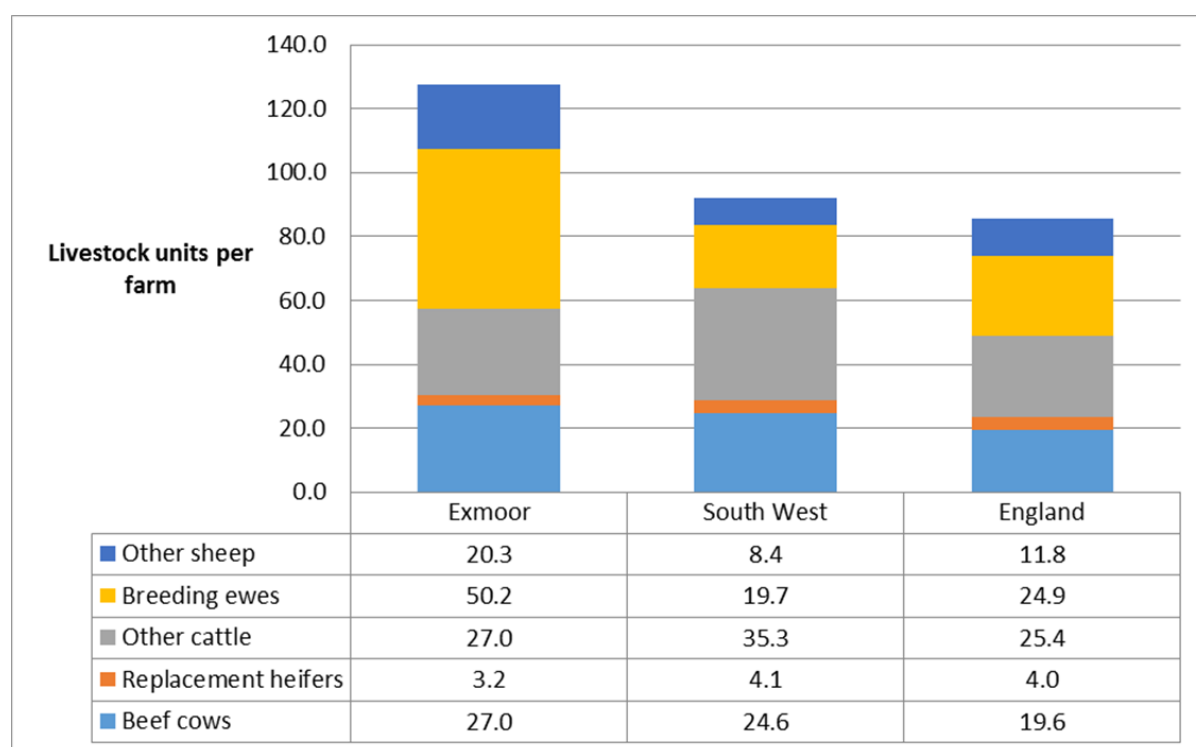
The EHFN Women in Farming Group is an outstanding success with 165 contacts on its distribution list. They receive an average of 16 attendees per meeting to all open and peer support group meetings. During a hectic 2016, the group have attended a sheep dairy farm, a goat dairy farm, a deer farm, and a multi-diversification farm. They held an evening event on pre-tupping ram MOTs, and made a visit to a new livestock collection centre. A visit to a large intensive sheep flock was perhaps the highlight of their year, including a trip away to the Royal Welsh Show in Powys.

Future EHFN work over the next three years is set to focus on:-

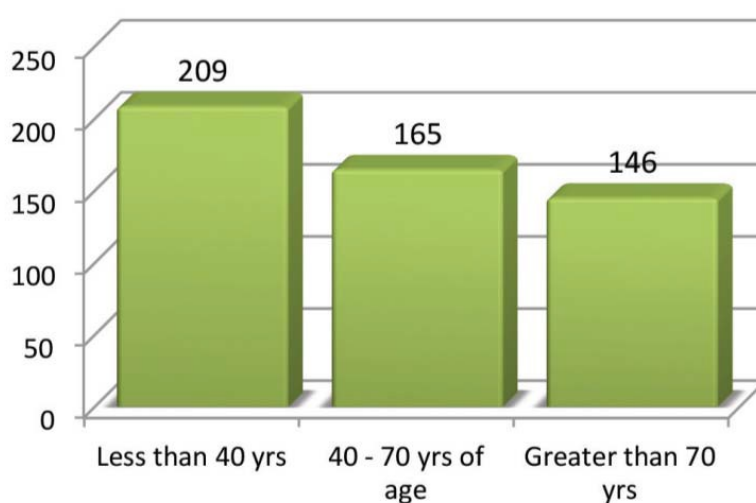
- The next generation of Exmoor farmers
- Collaboration, including potential for buying and selling groups and branding
- Livestock quality as influenced by genetics, health and profitability
- Market development
- On-farm management, such as record-keeping, farm safety, innovations, land care
- Landscape custodianship through improved land and environmental management
- Addressing issues of low income and mental health
- Increasing the understanding and 'voice' of Exmoor farming to influence policies.

Exmoor Farming in 2015-16

Robbins & Fogerty (2016) recorded 55% sheep within total GLUs (Grazing Livestock Units) by contrast with 31% on SW hill farms generally & 43% in English hill farms overall (Fig.2). Average store lamb prices at Exmoor Farmers Livestock Auctions in 2016 varied by a factor of 50% from £60 to £90 per head. Hence EHFN's 2016 focus on pricing factors was strategic.

Fig.2. Comparative Grazing Livestock Units per Farm (Source: Robbins & Fogerty, 2016)

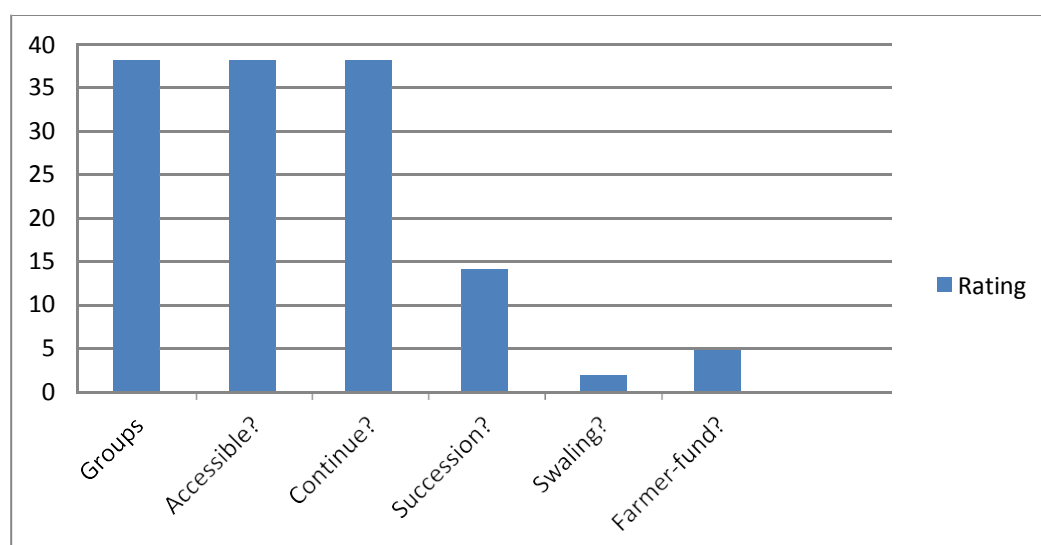
Dwyer *et al* (2015) noted that Exmoor farmers are not only farming more land than elsewhere but tend to be younger; furthermore, the younger they are the more land they are likely to be farming (Fig.3). EHFN's intention to focus even more on the next generation promises to be strategic in this.

Figure 3: Mean farm size (hectares) based upon age of farmer Source: CCRI Survey January 2015

EHFN Farmer Opinions: Discussion & Conclusions

A small 'dip' sample of EHFN farmer members/beneficiaries anonymously responded during January 2017, when many Exmoor farmers are unfortunately very busy with lambing greater numbers of sheep than hitherto, and tending housed cattle. Despite the small sample, analysis proceeded using that scale and all points scored positively though with differentials as per Fig.4. It must be stressed that these results are only indicative but helpful. All questions and ratings (using the 5-point Likert scale from 'Strongly agree = 5' to 'Strongly disagree = 1') are shown in Fig.5 below. Percentage ratings above a 60% baseline are shown in Fig.4: EHFN's Farmer Groups, accessibility and continuance are all strongly favoured.

Fig.4. EHFN Rating by Sample Farmers across Exmoor (n=13)



It is to be noted from Figs.4 and 5 that EHFN has more to cover on succession planning; swaling management has been covered by ENPA events separately and not all respondents attended. Future farmer-funding has yet to be debated by the Steering Group and other farmer members. While most respondents either agreed (40%) or were neutral (54%) about whether or not EHFN should be farmer-funded in future, one strong opinion was expressed that EHFN has a far stronger political position and voice liaising with Public Bodies, which could be lost if it was entirely farmer-funded. On the other hand, a farmer-owned EHFN with farmers taking responsibility for its long-term future under its own Constitution would not preclude it from applying for such grants and public funds as may from time to time become available for specific purposes, alongside its own self-sustaining core funding.

Many Public Funding Bodies and other Trusts keen to avoid a dependency ('hand-outs') culture are now looking for independent and entrepreneurial commitment from farmers to take responsibility for their own ongoing training and information-gathering needs. The EHFN Steering Group has yet properly to consider the possibility of its own Constitution and future funding. The message from this small sample is very clear that EHFN is much valued, its Coordinator's work highly appreciated and that farmers really want it to continue. Anecdotal evidence from many more farmers on Exmoor confirms this. The quest for future funding to enable EHFN will concentrate minds and discussions to resolve this for the widely agreed public good of Exmoor. EHFN current core funders are - The Prince's Countryside Fund, Exmoor National Park Authority, donations and fees from farmers and Exmoor based organisations, and commercial sponsorship.

Fig.5. Opinions of sample farmer beneficiaries of EHFN on Exmoor (January 2017).

Farmers' Opinions (n = 13 in sample anonymous responses)	Strength +ve (% score >60)	Comments
A. EHFN is helpful	35	
B. EHFN training is good	35	
C. EHFN Groups are good	38	Top rating
D. EHFN is easy to contact	38	Top rating
E. EHFN puts farmers first	32	
F. EHFN promotes farmer collaboration	32	
G. EHFN gives Exmoor Farmers a Voice	31	
H. EHFN motivates better farm management	34	
I. EHFN helps thought about future farming	31	
J. EHFN caters for different farming types	32	
K. EHFN links farming with other issues	28	
L. EHFN is a source of business help	32	
M. EHFN assists succession planning	14	Not covered
N. EHFN assists better livestock health	35	
O. EHFN assists better livestock feeding	34	
P. EHFN assists better livestock marketing	31	
Q. EHFN improves stock housing/handling	28	
R. EHFN improves soil management	25	If did training
S. EHFN improves grazing management	29	
T. EHFN improves hedge/fence management	18	If attended
U. EHFN improves swaling management	2	ENPA Events
V. EHFN helps combat isolation/loneliness	25	FCN here too
W. EHFN improves farmer solidarity	28	
X. EHFN should be continued long-term	38	Top rating
Y. EHFN should start more Farmer Groups	17	Consolidate 1st
Z. EHFN should be farmer-funded eventually	5	Opinion divided

The overall endorsement of EHFN's work is heartening and provides encouragement to the Steering Group to carry on with their steady work in leading this farmer-based, farmer-led initiative. All ratings were positive, though some more strongly than others.

Farmer respondents suggested closer Young Farmers' Clubs links for EHFN in future, wider participation by farmers on Exmoor. Although some expressed the need for some subsidy of the more costly training courses, the need to keep EHFN going was strongly stated – with whatever needs putting in place to ensure it is not lost. As to the role of EHFN, farmers mooted the following possibilities: more events/training on farm diversification and future markets; and circulating a list of kit to share/borrow between farms across Exmoor. However, the main opinion was that EHFN is an excellent organisation, does an excellent job, covers most things well and has the right balance already – thus should not overdo it. The need to continue to work and build a good working relationship with ENPA is considered by farmers to be vital to EHFN's future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although the EHFN has been generously supported with a £50k grant by The Prince's Countryside Trust (of HRH The Prince of Wales) and by the Exmoor National Park, the EHFN probably needs to move towards its own sustainability irrespective of future funding availability in order to secure its long-term future. It has been from the outset chaired by a farmer, and run by a farmer-dominant steering Group. In due course, its long-term sustainability will likely require it to develop its own Constitution and independent financial management, which has been hitherto ably handled by the Agency of North Devon+. This would depend on committed farmer support and initiative to make EHFN a farmer-owned communication and extension service for Exmoor's future, as elsewhere. It could still apply for appropriate grants and such public funding opportunities as from time to time arise. Its existing Farmer Groups are much valued and merit consolidation before too many more are spawned. EHFN is thought highly accessible by farmers and the stress-relieving importance of this cannot be overestimated for busy farming people.

For the greater good of Exmoor and in the light of current economic realities, Howe & Wibberley (2017), based on data from Robbins & Fogerty (2016) propose follow-up in our post-Brexit Britain by due partnership between Exmoor Society, ENPA, EHFN and

other interested parties. The Exmoor Hill Farming Network is well-placed to be the main implementing organisation for workshops and training:-

- Facilitation of workshops on farm business analysis, budgeting...
- Explorations with partial budgets for different future environmental payments
- Explorations of the potential to add value and to 'niche market' Exmoor produce
- Parallel study of poaching impact by bigger sheep, and cattle in milder, wet winters
- Strengthening/reviving a previous mentoring Scheme already established via EHFP
- Seeking to better identify knowledge/managerial skills sought by Exmoor farmers
- Succession planning discussions/workshops to assist farmers/other rural businesses
- Supporting research on Exmoor farmland conservation, e.g. 'Graze the Moor' Project; Humphries (2015) notes that sheep may be a valuable tool for sustaining of heather based on balanced grazing but this implies closer monitoring by stakeholders.
- It is hoped that the five-year *Headwaters of the Exe* Project initiated in autumn 2015 will enable further appreciation and financial reward for farmers who provide myriad contributions to ecosystem security through improved land management.

As Exmoor Hill Farming Network continues to draw new lessons from upland farming initiatives elsewhere, it is hoped that EHFN experience recorded here may inspire farmers in other upland areas to network for mutual advantage and public good internationally.

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