

South East Landscape Panel

Monmouthshire part of Brecon Beacons National Park – including the upland areas of the Black Mountains and Clydach Gorge/ Llangattock.

General description

A large part of this area is high ground, most notably along the Black Mountains ridges above the Llanthony and Grwyne valleys, Sugar Loaf, Mynydd Llangattock, Bryn Arw and the Skirrid. In the Black Mountains, both the Rivers Wye and Usk receive water captured in the Monmouthshire part of Black Mountains. Elsewhere in the Monmouthshire part of the National Park, streams and rivers mainly drain to the River Usk, but the small area north of the Skirrid drains to the Wye. Many of the upland areas are common land, grazed mainly by sheep and some ponies. Grazing on some of these commons has declined over the past few decades, with bracken and scrub often being the dominant vegetation on lower slopes. There is some management of these bracken areas on parts of the Sugar Loaf, where it is cut annually and where a grassy grazeable sward persists beneath the bracken fronds, but in other areas with no management, some of the bracken dominated ground is likely to eventually become woodland. The lower ground is mostly given over to livestock farming. Away from Abergavenny, most of the population is concentrated in villages such as Gilwern, Llanelly Hill and Llanfihangel Crucorney, but there are also many scattered properties and farms throughout the area.

Mynydd Llangattock/ Clydach Gorge

In the past the Mynydd Llangattock / Clydach gorge area was a hive of industry as evidenced today by the presence of disused quarries, old coal adits and mine spoil heaps, disused tramroads, railway lines, lime kilns and at the bottom of the gorge the Clydach Ironworks, a Grade II* listed building. Today most of the industry has gone, but disturbance to the area continues in the form of the A465 dualling project. Once completed, structures associated with this project are designed to reflect the industrial and geological history of the area, with rusty bridges and blockwork resembling beds of rock. River Clydach water quality is poor due to sewage effluent and other sources of pollution. However, Mynydd Llangynidr and Llangattock are a key source of drinking water, much of which issues in the Clydach Gorge.

One of the reasons industrialisation happened here was the presence of limestone and it is the species associated with the habitats found on the limestone that makes this area of national and international importance for its biodiversity. Natural limestone cliffs, rock outcrops and



some old quarry faces support several scarce and rare species of plants, including some that are endemic to this area and found nowhere else in the world, including the Craig y Cilau Hawkweed, which occurs in the Clydach Gorge and cliffs on the Powys part of Mynydd Llangattock and Welsh Whitebeam (*Sorbus cambrensis*), which occurs only on cliffs in the Powys part of Mynydd Llangattock, the Clydach Gorge and at Cwm Llanwenarth on the east side of Gilwern Hill. The individual tree after which the species is described grows in the Clydach Gorge. Damp areas and the deepest parts of the Clydach Gorge also support significant bryophyte communities, including northern species like Red Leskea (*Orthothecium rufescens*), here at its southernmost British location, and the rare Maderian Feather-moss (*Thamnobrum maderense*) at its only known Welsh location.

Within the limestone is one of the most extensive cave systems in Britain which extends from the Clydach Gorge under Mynydd Llangattock. Smaller caves are scattered through this area. The Usk Bat Sites SAC includes Mynydd Llangattock, this being a key area for what is the largest population of Lesser Horseshoe Bat in Europe. Much of the bat population spends the winter hibernating in and around the periphery of Mynydd Llangattock, but at other times of the year they move out to surrounding areas to breed, usually in larger buildings. The importance of this bat population means that they are often a key consideration in projects and planning decisions. The presence of the cave system has also resulted in the area being a popular destination for sports cavers and outdoor activity providers.

The extensive Beech Woodland in Cwm Clydach is mostly managed as a National Nature Reserve and is also of European importance and designated an SAC. Many trees are very old, but there is good regeneration in gaps. Associated with the woodland are a variety of unusual plants and the site is of particular significance for fungi.

Development aside, one of the main threats to the rare plants of the area, particularly those in limestone areas is the spread of Cotoneaster, which particularly prevalent on the Mynydd Llangattock side of the Clydach gorge, completely covering extensive areas that would otherwise be occupied by limestone grassland or cliff dwelling species. Cotoneaster has also recently spread to the south side of the gorge. Due to the steepness and inaccessibility of the places it grows, control of the plant is difficult and expensive. Educating the public not to grow such plants (which are often promoted as 'good for birds') would help the situation, but any physical control might need to be tightly focussed on keeping it away from the more sensitive areas due to costs involved. Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam are also present in the area.

Black Mountains and the Llanthony Valley



Parts of the Grwyne valley are covered in conifer plantation and there is probably scope for softening edges, replacing some with more broadleaved and mixed stock and with consideration of the height on the hillside to which they are planted, so that they don't impinge on the landscape. Ridges are heath dominated and include some of the more intensively managed heather areas, used for grouse shooting. Most hill land is common land and grazed with sheep and ponies. Lower slopes (including fridd zone) are mostly a mixture of bracken, bilberry heath, acid grassland, scrub and woodland, with where drainage is less free, some wet heath and flushes. Upland habitats and the fridd zone support important breeding bird assemblages. As with most upland area grazing levels appear to have declined and there might be a tendency towards bracken and scrub spread. The area is popular with sightseers visiting tourist attractions such as Llanthony Abbey, walkers, trekkers and cyclists, many of the latter passing through the Llanthony valley on their way to the Gospel Pass.

At the southern edge of this area is the Coed y Cerrig National Nature Reserve, which has woodland walks through dry ash wood and a disabled access boardwalk through wet alder woodland. The site is of European importance and designated an SAC. This area also supports important populations of Hazel Dormouse and Lesser Horseshoe Bat (associated with the Usk Bat Sites SAC) as well as the Welsh Clearwing moth which lives in the old birch trees often found at the edges of common land. Some invasive species issues e.g. Himalayan Balsam.

Sugar Loaf – Skirrid- Llanfihangel area

Very popular walking area at the south-eastern end of the Black Mountains ridges. Much of the higher ground owned and managed by the National Trust. There are several car parks close to the main hills to facilitate visitor use. Visitor number have increased in recent years and footpath erosion in some areas is chronic, with some remedial works underway. Some camp sites, mountain biking businesses, public houses, houses of historic interest in the area and nearby. The geomorphology of the area includes large historical landslips (Skirrid and Cwmyoy) and glacial moraines, which together with the shape of the Sugar Loaf, gives the area a unique character. There is an extensive area of oak woodland on the flanks of the Sugar Loaf which is considered to be of European importance (SAC). Most farmland is sheep-grazed, with some cattle grazing, arable and chicken units.



Ecosystems and broad Habitats	What is significant about it	What drives current management	Where should we build resilience	Where should we build resilience	Threats	Opportunities	Current Projects	Priority
Mountains – Black Mountains (see below), Sugar Loaf, Skirrid, Llangattock.	Opportunities for tourism, contribution to health and wellbeing. Woodland SAC.	National Trust Management Plan. Commoners Association. Commoners land Management on Sugar Loaf. Glastir Advanced.	Reduce impact of tourism and recreation. Manage fire risk on the hills.	Tourism data. Visitor counter numbers. National Trust – organised use and events.	SAC woodland damage. Path erosion. Loss of support for upland/ Common land grazing.	Engagement with South Wales Outdoor Activity Provider Group. Increased woodland cover. Better management of remaining areas of heathland.	Mountain Bike Training Guide Project Vale of Usk LAG LEADER funding 2018. Bracken cutting on Sugar Loaf. Ongoing woodland management St Mary's Vale.	Limit visitor damage – think hard about promoting areas for leisure activities as this will come with costs – e.g. path maintenance.



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Rivers Honddu Usk Gavenny Clydach.	Honddu -WFD report as poor. Gavenny – moderate. Clydach – poor.	NRW. Water Framework Directive (WFD). Fishing rights. Farming practices.	More invertebrates. Healthy fish stock.	WFD Honddu failing.	Degradation of aquatic ecosystems. INNS. Climate change. Abstraction.	Better catchment management.	Monnow Rivers Association. Wye and Usk Foundation (WUF) INNS projects.	Reduce sediment. Reduce farm slurry. Better farm management. Better use of agriculture payments.



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Black Mountains and Upland habitats generally	<p>Unique geographical position- highest ground in SE Wales and some of closest hills/ high ground to major population centres in southern England.</p> <p>Attracts tourism & recreation.</p> <p>Offa's Dyke.</p> <p>Largest area of Heathland in SE Wales.</p> <p>Small area of Bog.</p>	<p>Common land grazing.</p> <p>Agri Environment money.</p> <p>Glastir Commoners agreement.</p> <p>Black Mountains Land Use Partnership.</p> <p>BBNPA</p> <p>NRW</p>	<p>Less separation of common land in byeland management.</p> <p>Events management and regulation.</p>	<p>Need better understanding of what habitat management to focus in as climate changes.</p> <p>Gaps in knowledge, particularly of invertebrate species/ communities.</p>	<p>Loss of full time farming.</p> <p>Changes in grazing livestock – loss of cattle, more lamb less wethers.</p> <p>Wild fires – control of prevalence but manage gorse so still accessible on common land.</p> <p>Inappropriate tree management – halt spread of conifers.</p>	<p>Increase of cattle grazing.</p> <p>Engagement with land owners for sustainable land management.</p> <p>Better objective (adaptive) management, not prescriptive.</p> <p>Black Mountains Land Use Partnership.</p> <p>Invasive species management by BBNPA to eradicate Himalayan Balsam in a control area.</p>	<p>Black Mountains Land Use Management Sustainable Management Scheme Funding.</p> <p>NRW Management Agreements.</p> <p>BBNPA SDF Project - Cwm Bwchel Invasive Species Management March 2019.</p>	<p>Engagement with land owners on grazing practices.</p>



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	Unusual species more normally found in northern Britain.				Tackle invasive species on adjacent NRW owned land. Halt Peat erosion.			



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Forestry - Large Conifer Blocks	Large areas of conifer in upper valleys and edges of Black Mountains.	Commercial needs. NRW policy.	A managed ffridd zone. Native broad woodland creeping up the lower slopes. Better management of plantations and felling with replanting of more broadleaves.	NRW Forest Resource Plans.	Need less coniferous forest. Decrease in production of forest products. Conifers invading common land and especially heathland/ bog, causing some areas to fail condition monitoring. Better management of felling schemes to protect the environment	NRW Environment team need to be consulted on Forest Resource Plan. Better design of conifer plantations to reduce impacts on the landscape (and also potential to restore moorland habitat).	Felling of coupes is ongoing.	Off road vehicles Anti-social behaviour – raves in the forest.



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					– particularly run-off of sediments into streams including SSSI/SAC.			



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Designated sites & species e.g. Black Mountains, Coed-Y Cerrig NNR; Cwm Clydach NNR, Llanvihangel Moraine; Sugar Loaf Woodlands, River Usk, River Usk Tributaries, Mynydd Llangattock.	<p>Important area for Lesser Horseshoe Bat population.</p> <p>Also strong Hazel Dormouse population, but fragmented.</p> <p>Black Mountains is a Welsh Clearwing hotspot.</p> <p>Significant areas of Broadleaved woodland, with overlap of Western/Atlantic types and others more typical of SE England.</p> <p>Arctic alpine species at</p>	<p>NRW policy.</p> <p>Caving community.</p>	<p>Increase population of Merlin, Peregrine, Ring Ouzel, Waders, Hen Harriers & Native Mustelids at carrying capacity as indicators of resilience.</p> <p>More managed grassland.</p>	<p>Caving permits Issued.</p> <p>Visitor Numbers.</p>	<p>Air quality with dairy and chicken farms.</p>	<p>Protection of species at the edge of their range.</p> <p>More grassland habitat created and designated.</p> <p>NNR – education and recreation/ tourism opportunity.</p>	<p>Various designated sites projects.</p>	



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	<p>southern edge of British range.</p> <p>Endemic species, some unique to this area.</p>							



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Tourism & Recreation sites	Walking, Riding, Outdoor activity providers, Sports caving, Cycling.	BBNPA NRW Local Access Forums. Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP).		Visitor numbers – any increase should be equal to investment in Green infrastructure.	Recreational pressure and parking issues. Damage to footpaths. Raves in forests.	Goytre wharf developed as a hub and community involved in design of replanting work to improve recreation opportunities. Sugar Loaf, Bloreng and Skirrid for walking and mountain biking. Rights of Way Improvement Plan. Fishing on Usk. Engagement with South Wales Outdoor Activity Providers Group (SWOAPG) and tourism providers to halt damage.	Mountain Bike Training Guide Project Vale of Usk LAG 2018 LEADER funding. NRW Grant Torfaen Volunteer Support (28707) To recruit a volunteer coordinator, establish a steering group, training and communication network. To promote “green prescribing” to maximise the health benefits of environmental volunteering, establish links with local businesses and	



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						<p>Offa's Dyke path Beacons Way.</p> <p>Llanthony Priory – introduction of large scale sheep grazing.</p> <p>Sustrans cycle routes with one A465 dualling finished, the Clydach Gorge joining to Blaenafon.</p>	capture learning in a final report.	
Dark skies	Especially in Black Mountains.				Light pollution from development Planning.	Consideration given in any Planning applications.		Planning controls.



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Canal-Brecon to Pontypool	Opportunity for tourism and recreation. Abstraction issues.	Canal and Rivers Trust.			Abstraction. Need more electric charging points to encourage electric barges.	Goytre wharf developed as a hub and community involved in design of replanting work to improve recreation opportunities.	Monmouthshire, Brecon and Abergavenny Canals Trust Community Boat Project _ Vale of Usk LAG.	
Climate change	Air quality. Wild fires.	A465 Dualling. Farming practices – number of poultry and cattle farms.	Monitor farming practices.		Wildfires/ arson/ offroading. Lack of public Transport.	Fully charged (electric vehicle charging points) Vale of Usk LAG. NFM projects. Active transport – use of canal for walking and cycle routes.	Co-working study in Monmouthshire Vale of Usk LAG. Project with Fully charged (electric vehicle charging points) Vale of Usk LAG. Vale of Usk LAG RECS Scheme.	



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Land Management	Sizeable areas of land are owned or managed by.			Need to evaluate what the resource is and how.		What best to focus management resources on.	NNR Management Plans/ NT plans etc.	

Themes

- Climate ready Gwent (Natural Flood Management)
- Healthy and active (Recreation, Air quality, sustainable food)
- Ways of working (SMNR)

