Grazing for Good: Evidence review of Grazing Regimes for Nature Recovery

Project Overview

This collaborative research project, led by the Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association (HSBA), West Lakeland CIC and the Federation of Cumbrian Commoners, focuses on the future sustainability of Upland and Hill sheep farming within the Lake District and surrounding areas.

Bringing together industry, community and farming stakeholders, the project aims to generate evidence that supports productive and resilient sheep farming systems while recognising the vital ecological, social and economic benefits these landscapes provide. By exploring approaches that balance agricultural output with environmental stewardship and rural livelihoods, the research will help inform the development of sustainable Upland farming systems for the future.

Aims

- Conduct an independent scientific review of existing evidence to help structure/inform agri-environment approaches to grazing, nature recovery and upland management on fells
- Focused on the lake district national park
- To critically examine the value of grazing livestock in the hills, whether that is value to farming, nature, landscape or public goods

Results

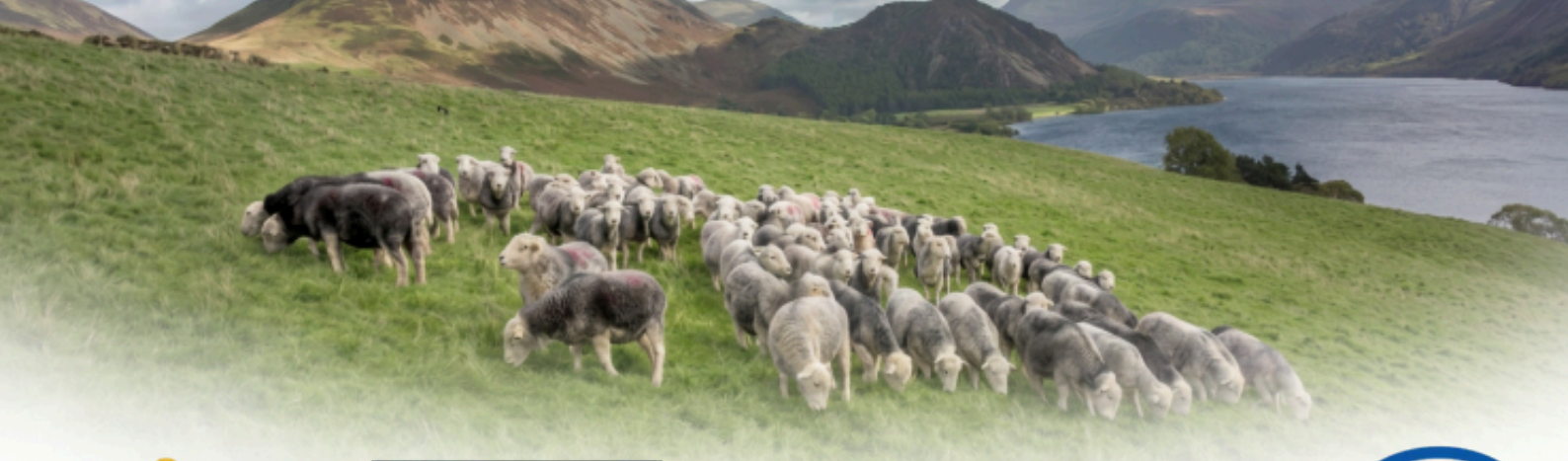
🌱 **No magic number exists**

The review found no scientific evidence that a stocking rate of 0.5 ewes/ha is a universally effective threshold for habitat recovery, nor evidence that rates above 0.6 ewes/ha prevent recovery across the Lake District High Fells. The science simply does not support a one-size-fits-all approach.

🌱 **Habitat recovery is about more than sheep numbers**

Nature recovery is shaped by a complex mix of factors, including climate change, atmospheric nitrogen deposition, historical land management, burning practices, vegetation type, trampling, and the timing and distribution of grazing. Stocking rate is just one part of a much bigger picture.

Farming in Protected Landscapes programme



Local conditions matter

Evidence from across the UK and Europe shows that different habitats require different grazing pressures. Successful habitat management depends on site-specific circumstances, seasonal variation and the unique characteristics of each landscape.

Key Conclusion

A single stocking rate cannot be applied across all Lake District fells and habitats. Effective nature recovery requires flexible, evidence-based grazing management tailored to local environmental conditions, rather than reliance on a universal stocking figure.

Impacts on the sheep sector

Securing the future of Upland sheep farming through evidence-led policy and sustainable land management.

This research will help to demonstrate the vital role of grazing sheep in delivering thriving hill farming businesses, resilient landscapes and environmental public goods. By protecting hefted flocks and common grazing systems, addressing practical challenges such as bracken spread, tick management and off-wintering pressures and supporting locally tailored agri-environment schemes, the project will provide the evidence needed to ensure sheep farming remains at the heart of sustainable Upland land use and rural communities.

Through a farmer-led approach, the project will strengthen trust and engagement in policy development while showcasing how sheep grazing delivers multiple public benefits, including biodiversity enhancement, carbon management, water regulation, landscape conservation and rural wellbeing, alongside the production of high-quality food.

The Grazing for Good project was initiated by the Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association, Federation of Cumbria Commoners and West Lakeland CIC, and is now supported and project-managed by NSA. The project was made possible through donations from local agricultural orgnaisations and FiPL funding from the Lake District National Park Authority.