APPENDIX 2. Traditional land uses: commoning in the New Forest

Common land in the UK

In the UK, the term "common land" refers to land in private ownership, where traditional rights exist for people ("commoners") other than the landowner to use the land in specific ways. Such rights include the grazing of stock (common of pasture), digging of peat for fuel (turbery), collecting timber (estovers) and the taking of fish (piscary) (Aitchison et al. 2000, Short 2008). In recent years, common land has become the focus of increasing interest and concern. Specific issues relate to the decline of their economic functions, which could potentially threaten their existence; the development of multiple use patterns; their resilience to socio-economic and environmental change; and the policy responses required to sustain them in future (Short 2008).

The high value of common land for biodiversity conservation is widely acknowledged (Aitchison and Medcalf 1994, Aitchison et al. 2000). This value is illustrated by the fact that around 20% of all Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in England include common land, and that 55% of all commons contain SSSIs (Bathe 2005). Given their long history of human use, there is a widespread belief that the biodiversity value of common land is dependent on maintenance of traditional management approaches (Hindmarch and Pienkowski 2000). A recent review of pastoral commoning (i.e. the grazing of common land with livestock) in England suggested that there has been a significant reduction in the numbers of grazing livestock on commons over the last twenty years, and especially during the past decade (Pastoral Commoning Partnership 2009).

Common land in the New Forest

In the New Forest there were five "rights of common", namely pasture (to allow grazing of cattle, ponies and donkeys), mast (to turn out pigs in the pannage season), turbary (to collect turf fuel), estovers (to collect fuel wood) and marl (to collect marl from recognized pits) (Tubbs 2001). Commoning is overseen by the Verderers Court, which includes five elected and five appointed Verderers whose role is to regulate the exercise of Rights of Common on the Forest. Their role is underpinned by New Forest Acts and byelaws that are enforced under their statutory responsibilities. The Verderers are supported by five Agisters, who oversee commoning activities across the Forest, including monitoring the condition and welfare of de-pastured animals, and organising the annual "drifts" when the animals are rounded up and marked (The Pastoral Commoning Partnership 2009). Annual fees are paid to the Verderers for all animals de-pastured on the Forest. The New Forest is unusual in that grazing numbers are officially unrestricted, but are limited to those individuals whose properties have the right to pasture attached.

As a result of commoning activities, the New Forest has been subjected to a number of forms of anthropogenic disturbance, which have varied in intensity over time. While grazing of livestock is today the most significant, other traditional uses included collection of turf and peat for fuel, and harvesting of heathland plants (such as gorse,

heather and bracken) for fodder, thatch and bedding. Burning of heathland was also carried out to provide fresh regrowth for livestock (Tubbs 2001). In Medieval times, these uses were intensive, but as noted in the main text, they declined in the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly after World War II, representing a shift away from subsistence agriculture. Since then, agricultural policies and the development of mass marketing of agricultural produce have favoured large farms at the expense of smallholdings, which have declined nationally. The price of land and housing has increased markedly in the New Forest in recent decades, as the area has increasingly been colonized by incomers. Today, the use of common land to pasture livestock is largely a management option for farms, rather than a central component of the agricultural economy as it once was (Tubbs 2001).

The economics of commoning, and its future prospects, have been the subject of a recent review (The New Forest Commoning Review Group 2007). This highlighted the poor economic returns from commoning, and suggested that this is undermining its long term sustainability. Yet the number of people depasturing animals in the Forest actually increased by 50% from 1987 to 2007 (Pastoral Commoning Partnership 2009), despite the lack of a significant economic incentive. For many commoners today, depasturing livestock on the Forest is primarily undertaken to continue family traditions and as a social habit, rather than to generate significant revenue. Participation in the social occasions associated with commoning therefore now outweigh profit as a motive to engage in commoning activities (Tubbs 2001). This also accounts for the continual increase in the number of ponies depastured in recent decades (see Figure 2, main text). The high social and cultural value of commoning therefore confers a degree of resilience to the system.

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