

Riparian Fencing

Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group

I've seen pasture pumps used with apparent success (also on the Itchen), to bridge a fenced footpath along a carrier stream.

My main concern here is with the principle of fencing off watercourses. Is this really necessary?

Having surveyed many riverbanks in Hampshire, Wiltshire and elsewhere, in my experience fencing simply creates an ungrazeable strip of "weeds" along the edge of the river, usually turning eventually into a strip of dense willow scrub. The fringing marshy vegetation and pasture/marsh interface is obliterated, and the watercourse often becomes heavily shaded.

Where it's done along ditches, the ditch ends up as willow or alder scrub, and ultimately a strip of willow woodland overflows into the surrounding fields, completely shading and choking the watercourse and preventing use of surrounding fields by open-landscape birds.

I think this fencing fashion is really a rather thoughtless over-reaction to over-grazing, which certainly does occur along some watercourses, removing all bankside vegetation and allowing erosion of the banks. However, I think the problem there is the "over", not the "grazing", and the best solution is usually to reduce the grazing rather than remove it altogether.

Commonly the fences are put a metre or two from the water's edge, or set back a little more to allow a fishermen's path. Either way the fenced-off area is unmanageable.

I think a much better way to deal with bankside overgrazing (for example where a river flows through intensive dairy pasture), is to fence off a much wider strip (at least 10 m), to form a riverside paddock where grazing levels can be controlled to a more appropriate level. This also provides a better buffer from other effects of intensive pasture, such as herbicides and fertiliser.

Fishermen seem to like the riverside barricades -- I can't work out a good reason why, unless it's just nervousness of cattle sniffing at their sandwiches.

Another concern often expressed is that stock will fall into the water. Again I think this is overstated (how did animals manage before cheap wire fences...?) Our cattle do occasionally fall in, but only very overweight or unusually weak animals (not that ours are...) seem to have any trouble climbing out again. In any case I'd much rather dig occasional exit ramps than destroy important marginal habitat.

Any other thoughts?

Richard C

Many thanks to everyone who has provided feedback on this.

In response to Richard's concerns with regard to fencing off watercourses, it is perhaps not a perfect solution but may be the best option in certain situations. Vegetation growth behind fences is a valid concern which we have not overlooked. I would agree that where grazing can be controlled to achieve the desired result this is a preferable option. Fences have a number of negative implications, of which the aesthetics and costs are two more.

However, controlling numbers of grazing animals is not always possible and the issue is not always over-grazing. Establishment of buffer strips through fencing does reduce pollution, and on a number of our Dartmoor rivers, is used to protect salmon spawning gravels from trampling by animals and cementing by soils from poached and eroded areas.

In this instance, it is the salmon, and to a lesser extent trout, which are a priority for conservation (although we try to undertake work in a way that takes other species/habitat considerations into account.) Where fences are installed, we generally undertake selective coppicing to reduce overshading although this is often not a sustainable option. I would be very pleased to hear of other suggestions which would help us to enhance salmon spawning habitat which is subject to damage by animals, without fencing.

Surely there is no one answer to the issues of grazing along watercourses. Each site and situation should be dealt with separately in accordance with specific aspirations.

Frances Cooper

I didn't see the original e-mail that this refers to but I agree with all that Richard says apart from one thing. From my experience with the Drovers grazing project here in Northumberland National Park using traditional breeds of cattle for conservation grazing we have found that cows like to go near water to calve which can be problematic in some cases. I would therefore suggest that the 10m strips should not be grazed with cows due to calve.

Sally Hutt
Drovers Project Officer

Sally -

This is not a problem we've had -- our cows seem to calve reasonably sensibly, usually in a quiet spot well away from the water.

I see the 10 m strips really only being for where adjacent intensive management cannot be changed. In this case the waterside strip can be managed either by turning dry cows in there for a while, or perhaps by letting the whole herd in for a few days at a time. I think 10 m is really too narrow for the longer term.

Of course it's far better to avoid the need for fencing altogether, by managing the whole field properly...

Richard C

Water can be a problem for newly calved cows; they lose a lot during the birth. So although they are usually very thirsty, they will be reluctant to go far from the calf until it has properly mothered up and fed. This would explain why they favour areas closer to water when giving birth.

Bill

We find that new calves are usually left curled up in a tussock for two or three days, with the mother wandering some distance away with the others. Never noticed any reluctance to travel to water, and they certainly go as far as our sites allow -- perhaps five hundred metres or more. Nor noticed a cow drinking at all much until the calf has suckled, even with water nearby.

The calf seems to know mum needs to be able to refind it -- if disturbed it may run away, but will tend to run in a circle and so return to the same spot. The cow will often (but not always) keep more or less in sight, and will sometimes give away the calf's location by looking towards it. Otherwise it's a grid-pattern search, and even a conspicuously white calf can be a devil to find amongst a few hectares of sedge or heather!

This behaviour often leads to reports of a calf being "deserted".

Don't think this is just British Whites -- I think most or all cattle do it. Deer too of course -- I actually stepped on a hidden roe fawn (kid?) earlier this year, but fortunately the ground was soft and its finger-thick leg bones remained intact.

Conversely, on one occasion a cow led us proudly to her calf hidden in the middle of a pine plantation.

Richard C
