



Don't ban the burn

Ground-breaking research between 2013 and 2020 highlights the importance of prescribed burning for the management of our peatlands. Under the right circumstances, controlled burns may provide protection against devastating wildfires while sequestering carbon, offering a nature-based solution to our climate change emergency. No policy decision should be made about the UK's largest carbon store without understanding the consequences, particularly considering the potential impacts of alternatives of cutting or no management.

Dr Mark Ashby, of Lancaster University and Whitebeam Ecology, who has conducted an extensive review on heather burning, said: "The debate around heather burning remains unresolved. The review of the latest evidence demonstrates that some previously held assumptions are now unsafe and should, therefore, not be used as the basis for policy."

His findings include:

- Production of charcoal during managed burning could benefit long-term carbon storage.
- Burning does not appear to cause water discolouration.
- Controlled burning reduces fuel loads which may help to prevent and limit wildfires.
- The ending of managed burning in the USA resulted in declines in bird life and an increase in wildfires.
- Greenhouse gas emissions from controlled burning are insignificant compared with emissions from wildfire or severely degraded lowland peatlands used for agriculture and may even reduce methane emissions due to charcoal mitigated impacts on microbial activity.

Ongoing peatland research at the University of York's Stockholm Environment Institute indicates a balance between mowing, burning and unmanaged areas might be the best approach to managing peatlands in upland areas.

In July 2020, *Dr Andreas Heinemeyer said*: "When we burn, we do pollute the air, but we also lock away some of the carbon for a very long time in the form of charcoal. Mowing, by contrast, leaves a huge amount of biomass which generally nearly all decomposes and releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere."

The 2018 Saddleworth Moor wildfire significantly contributed to toxic air quality. The lack of managed burning on the area was heavily criticised. *Liverpool University's Professor Rob Marrs said*: "Leaving the land alone causes much more damage than controlled burning because there's more heather to burn so it gets hotter and spreads to the peat, which in turn spreads the fire."

The BASC position on burning is very clear and focuses on improving our peatlands: Burning vegetation in the uplands is an essential tool in wildfire management and mitigation. Burning can increase biodiversity. Its use is site dependent. It is wrong to say that you should always burn or never burn.



Gareth Dockerty
gareth.dockerty@basc.org.uk
www.basc.org.uk