

Broad Character: Unimproved Grazing
Character Type: Coastal Rough Ground
National Perspective

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING/DISTINGUISHING ATTRIBUTES

The Coastal Rough Ground Character Type includes:

- Rough grassland
- Scrub
- Heathland

Coastal Rough Ground (CRG) includes various forms of very unintensively managed and often unenclosed land which characterise the coastal land periphery of many areas. Such coastal rough ground often contrasts with highly intensively managed areas immediately adjacent inland but also, as a summer grazing resource, it forms an important and distinctive part of the coastal agricultural economy. It also frequently provides a refuge for rare and endangered ecological communities specific to coastal margins. Hence, it is often subject to wildlife conservation designation, especially heathland. Of particular relevance for HSC, coastal rough ground provides the Character Type accommodating much of our coastal access provision and most of our long distance coastal footpaths: the places in which many people experience directly their coastal landscape and seascape perceptions. Typical forms of coastal rough ground are rough grassland, scrub and heath.

Rough grassland encompasses those areas of CRG dominated by unintensively managed grassland. Maintenance of such grassland may be the result of long traditions of coastal rough grazing but in some areas it is now being deliberately re-introduced as a conservation measure to prevent land reverting to scrub.

Scrub encompasses those areas of CRG covered by scrub vegetation: areas dominated by shrubs or bushes of woody plants and sometimes including small trees. Scrub may vary considerably in its openness or impenetrability, and coastal scrub may be dominated by distinctive scrub species. The effect of salt spray blown by strong winds may shape stands of coastal scrub into dramatic asymmetrical shapes that can have a strong impact on visitor's perceptions of such areas and their distinctiveness. In some areas, the development of coastal scrub from rough grassland increased from the late 20th century as grazing stock levels have declined; in response, scrub growth is now being inhibited deliberately by the re-introduction of grazing as a conservation measure.

Heathland encompasses those areas of CRG dominated by dwarf shrubs including heathers and gorses in varying proportions, sometimes in a mosaic with patches of grassland and locally damp areas. Usually on acidic soils in relatively wet areas, they provide a habitat for many rare plant and animal species for which their surviving areas are extensively are frequently covered by wildlife conservation designation and conservation management initiatives.

Historically, coastal rough ground has been mostly used as common grazing. Although many visitors may see these as 'wild, windswept and remote' places, these are highly cultural habitats, the product of thousands of years of human activity, particularly summer grazing management and in many areas, the focus of much extractive industry. They are also now a focus for recreation; long distance coastal footpaths often pass through areas of coastal rough ground.

HISTORICAL PROCESSES; COMPONENTS, FEATURES AND VARIABILITY

Many of the cultural imprints of coastal rough ground are expressed in the character of the vegetation and soil profile, coupled with a low density of built features. However where they do occur, typical structural elements may include:

- military defences (e.g. pillboxes, anti-tank cubes, Roman signal stations, fortifications, radar stations)
- prehistoric and historic sites
- finds and field systems (flint scatters, barrows, coin hoards, settlements)
- maritime safety services (e.g. coastguard lookouts)
- navigation aids (e.g. lighthouses, fog stations, landmarks)
- industrial extraction and processing sites (e.g. quarries, mines, limekilns)
- recreational facilities (e.g. caravan and chalet parks, golf links)

Typical vegetation over much coastal rough ground would commonly have been herb-rich rough grassland. After widespread abandonment by farmers during the later 20th century, management neglect has often led to scrub growth, now itself sometimes the subject of conservation management measures.

Much coastal rough ground would have previously been managed as a resource within the farming economy in conjunction with other neighbouring Historic Landscape/Seascape Character Types, principally medieval and post-medieval enclosed land and available areas of common grazing on higher land. As a resource of summer grazing and fuel grounds, it formed an essential element of the coastal mixed farming landscape.

Heathland in particular is formed on areas of sandy soil which are easy to cultivate and were therefore attractive to early farmers with primitive technology (Williamson 2006, 174). The combination of acid soils and grazing pressure encourages a process known as 'podzolisation' in which organic matter and minerals are leached out of the soil (ibid). This subsequently allows the development of the characteristic underscrub vegetation dominated by heather (ibid). Traditionally the heathland was used for intensive sheep grazing, maintaining its character by not allowing natural processes to convert the land back into woodland.

Other processes and practises which shaped this type of landscape include the harvesting of the natural vegetation for fuel, thatch and animal husbandry, and warrenning (rabbit farming). Heathland would therefore have appeared more managed in the medieval and post medieval periods (ibid, 60). Latterly large areas of heath were turned over for permanent cultivation. This process began in the 18th century but became widespread after WW2 when arable cultivation dramatically increased to boost the economy.

VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS

Coastal rough ground is often well visited by way of coastal paths. Not only does it provide a recreational and leisure resource for locals and visitors, it also forms the area from which many derive their coastal landscape and seascape perceptions. As a result it probably has a formative influence on people's seascape perceptions far in excess of its proportion of the coastal land area.

Despite that influence, the cultural roles played in the formation and current management of coastal rough ground are probably overlooked by many visitors, feeling these areas offer an escape from urban life and pressures and may well not wish to see that they are still in a highly artifically created land and seascape. This appeal is reinforced by tourist industry literature that presents these areas as 'wild, windswept and remote' places.

The unintensive character of their management has led to many of these areas being highly valued for their archaeological richness and their levels of biodiversity. Many of these areas contain high numbers of Scheduled Monuments and features recorded on

Historic Environment Records (HERs), while concerns about the lowering of biodiversity from management neglect is leading to scrub growth being inhibited deliberately by the re-introduction of grazing in some areas: clearly emphasising the cultural dimension of these areas, and of biodiversity levels. The ecological importance arising from this land's management also attracts many wildlife watchers.

RESEARCH, AMENITY AND EDUCATION

In recent years, archaeological and historic survey, research and documentation of this Character Type has increased our understanding greatly, but there remain many aspects still to be addressed.

Its generally good accessibility has led to this Character Type being key to shaping many people's landscape and seascape perceptions. Its accessibility and recreational use give it a huge potential for informative and educational initiatives, especially where they raise awareness of the cultural dimension of the seascape and the overlapping perspectives to, from and along the coast that are themselves one of the unique land/sea-scape characteristics of the coast in general. Opportunities to realise this potential are substantially enhanced by the provisions contained in the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 to create a right of public coastal access around England's coastline.

CONDITION AND FORCES FOR CHANGE

This Character Type is generally well used by walkers and other visitors and this is likely to continue to increase. Some erosion problems could arise as a result and will need informed and sensitive management. That applies too in the routing and maintenance of the England's coastal access route provided for in the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. That Act also states that the access will be resilient to coastal change (HM Government 2009). But as noted above, the Act's access provisions also create major public-awareness raising opportunities. While the content will need careful balance to ensure both cultural and natural character perceptions and environmental dimensions are conveyed, the siting of such information provision, where not offered through online resources, will also need to derive from broader visitor management plans for the route.

In some areas such as Suffolk, pressures for change also arise from increased moves to cultivate traditional grazing land and the wide-scale establishment of conifer plantations in areas such as Suffolk.

RARITY AND VULNERABILITY

Agricultural economic forces and recreational pressures have left much coastal rough ground at risk from neglect and visitor erosion in recent years. While still present, this risk is now recognised and the various cultural and ecological values which bear on this Character Type are now prompting measures to reverse its management decline and maintain its character. Creation and maintenance of the new public access route across England's coastline will need care and sensitivity to harmonise with coastal rough ground's management needs.

Very little of England's ancient heathland survives (<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-heathland>), leading to the designation of most remaining areas such as the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB and the National Park status of the New Forest.

PUBLISHED SOURCES

HM Government. 2009. *Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009*. London: HM Stationary Office Ltd

Williamson, T., 2006, *England's Landscape: East Anglia*. English Heritage

WEBSITES

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/marine/legislation/index.htm>