

Heathland management in Denmark

By Hans Jørgen Degn

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Heathland in Denmark is man-made except for a narrow strip on the dunes along the western coast. It began three thousand years ago. Pollen analyses from the bronze-age contain so much fine airborne charcoal, that it means that the farmers used fire to improve grazing for their animals. Heather, which is evergreen, is obviously a better winter forage than withered (dead) grass.

During the next few thousand years the heathland expanded its range through the farmers' use of it and through overexploitation of the woodland. When heathland was at its maximum, it was an absolutely essential part of a farm in the western part of Jutland. Due to the farmer's use to make a living, dominance of heather was maintained. The farmer:

- Cut every tree he could use.
- Let his animals graze the heathland the year around.
- Cut the heather for winter forage, fuel, thatching material and many other purposes.
- Saw frequent fires.
- Cut the sods (turfs) for fuel, ashes for fertilizer, improving the compost heap, etc.
- Cultivated small fields for a few years.

About 100 years ago it was a widespread belief that Danish heathland was completely natural and descended directly from the tundra vegetation, which had covered the country after the ice had melted away about 15.000 years ago. More than 50 years had to pass before it was generally accepted that heathland was a result of cultural influence, and that management was necessary for the conservation of heathland.

This management is in principle an imitation of the farmer's use in former times but with modern equipment:

- Removing self-sown bushes and trees (chain saw, chips).
- Grazing with various breeds of sheep and cattle, to a lesser extent horses and goats. Fences.
- Cutting with various equipment from old small farm- machines to specialized ones.
- Burning when possible, restricted by law. Fire-breaks and fire-fighting material.
- Removal of sods. Special Dutch machine.
- Conversion of abandoned fields to heathland.

The experience gained through the last half century can be shortly summarized in this way:

- Cutting or burning deciduous bushes and trees is no solution. Effective towards conifers. Remove the material.
- Grazing has not been used on military areas. Can eliminate deciduous bushes and trees.
- Cutting is a good alternative to burning. Can be used in a longer season, close to woodland etc, without fire-breaks. Remove the material.
- Burning can be used where no machines can work. Avoid ploughed fire-breaks.
- Removal of sods is very effective and long-lasting. Small areas. The material has to be dealt with.
- The succession from farmland to heathland raise the biodiversity. Only on disturbed soil.

Aiming points:

1. Heathland is an open landscape.
2. Heathland is dominated by dwarf-shrubs.
3. Heathland is a nutrient-poor type of nature.
4. Room for other characteristic heathland plants. Not cultivation of heather.
5. Vegetation is found in various age-classes and different biotopes.
6. Variation through the use of different methods.
7. Heathland vegetation is successional, not static.
8. Management culturally authentic in Latvia ??
9. Costly management → Use without cost.