CHAPTER 2.4 OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES AND MANAGEMENT OPTIONS

2.4.1 Rationale: Selection and Ranking

The main feature making Parsonage Down NNR unique is the large, unfragmented area of uniform, short, herb-rich calcicolous grassland. This contains uncommon plant and animal communities and includes rare and nationally restricted plant and animal species. The principal objective of management must be to maintain this calcicolous grassland.

The grassland has been maintained and shaped over the last 60 years by a stable grazing regime, using both cattle and sheep. To maintain the grassland in its present condition it is essential to maintain this grazing regime.

An important facet of the grazing regime on the downland is the ability to move stock on and off at short notice, according to sward and weather conditions. To maintain this flexibility it is necessary to have back-up-land of lower botanical value.

The reserve is under a Treasury obligation to make a profit; the back-up-land and livestock must therefore be additionally managed to achieve this.

The species composition of the sward is finely tuned to the grazing regime. Some species will respond adversely if the regime is changed. The decline in Gentianella anglica on Parsonage Bank is an example of this. Thus to keep the delicate balance required by some species the grazing regime needs to be maintained.

The less botanically rich, younger swards of the new downland provide a great opportunity to experiment on and demonstrate the revision to botanically rich chalk grassland. This would be particularly valuable in view of proposed extensification and set aside policies, and would eventually extend the area of calcicolous grassland on the reserve. At the moment it is not recolonising at any speed, and management changes will be necessary to speed up the process.

The reserve presents an ideal opportunity to demonstrate the compatibility of low intensity farming with nature conservation. It would also be greatly appreciated by the general public for enjoyment of the flora and livestock, for passive recreation (eg picnicking). It is, however, necessary to concentrate demonstration towards target groups of visitors. This is due to:

i) the specialised nature of the conservation message;

ii) the limited resources available for demonstration.

In view of NCC's attempts to promote conservation in the wider agricultural countryside and the advent of "extensification" policies, farmers should be the priority target. They are more likely to be influenced if conservation practices are demonstrated on a profitable working farm.

It is desirable to maintain the secondary wildlife habitats on the reserve for their additional conservation value. On the SSSI, however, the primary aim is to maintain the unfragmented, short turf and it would be inappropriate to diversify the downland by, for example, creating long vegetation habitats for invertebrates. Existing secondary habitats such as scrub and woodland should be retained largely at their present extent, with only limited expansion to small butterfly enclosures, a second dew pond and gapping up existing hedges and shelterbelts.

Within the back-up-land there is also the opportunity to maintain and develop secondary habitats. Here there is the additional imperative to demonstrate to the farming community the methods of habitat creation that NCC and FWAG are encouraging landowners to implement on their own farms. Bearing in mind the need to maintain profitability, there is a limit to the amount of land that can be given over to developing secondary habitats.

It would be desirable to re-establish rare species once known to occur on the site. Of these the greatest potential is for the recolonisation of the reserve by stone curlews following the creation of suitable breeding habitat. Other attempts are being made by NCC within the region to encourage this species and attempts here will depend on the relation with higher priority sites. The establishment of breeding habitat on the reserve should, however, require few extra resources. The now very low population in the region makes success far from certain.

It has also been suggested that the Adonis blue butterfly could be reintroduced. The reasons for this species becoming extinct are not clear as the present grazing regime should be suitable. The limited distribution of the butterfly's food plant, Hippocrepis comosa, and the lack of small scale bare areas created by rabbits, thin soils or poaching combined with the site's exposure and lack of strong southerly aspect may act against the species. The current suitability of the site for reintroduction of the species should be reassessed.

One of Robert Wales' wishes was that as many of the rare breeds as possible were retained. Of those on the farm at the time of NCC purchase, the Longhorn herd were the only viable one. The Jacob sheep flock, a breed no longer rare, was already being cut down, and the single Highland cow had little breeding potential. The longhorn herd thus fulfills Mr Wales' wishes and should continue to be maintained. The breed is also useful for cross breeding and is becoming more saleable as pure bred stock.

It follows from the above that the primary objective is the maintenance of the downland continuing the long established grazing regime; managerial constraints dictate that this should be achieved by continuing to run a working farm on a profit making basis. The second objective, in support of NCC's desire to influence agricultural practices, is to use the combination of the downland and the working farm for demonstration purposes.

A major secondary objective, in terms of both conservation and demonstration, is to encourage revision of semi-improved pasture to calcicolous downland. The maintenance and enhancement of secondary wildlife habitats on both downland and back-up-land will also fulfill a combined conservation/demonstration role.

The re-establishment of lost species must have a lower priority. Success is by no means certain, and other sites may be more suitable.

Maintenance of the longhorn herd fulfills Robert Wales' wishes and is also valid in terms of stock breeding and profitability.

Provision of facilities, as mentioned above, must be concentrated on demonstration, primarily to agriculturalists. Research will probably be limited to encouraging outside bodies to use the site. Access for public enjoyment will be limited to a few open days.

2.4.2 Identification of Operational Objectives

2.4.2.1 Conservation of Features

OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVE	MANAGEMENT OPTION	OUTLINE PRESCRIPTION
1. Maintain the large unfragmented area of uniformly structured, botanically rich calcicolous grassland, and its associated plant and animal species.	A3	1. Maintain the current cattle and sheep grazing regime using NCC herd and flocks. 2. Maintain back-up land to allow the manipulation of stock numbers on the herb-rich grassland. 3. Maintain farm infrastructure (fencing buildings and machinery) to support the grazing regime. 4. Monitor and record grazing levels. 5. Monitor the grassland habitat particularly for changes in species composition and changes in sward height. 6. Encourage specialists to study and evaluate the invertebrate species occurring on the reserve.
2. Maintain all rare and nationally restricted plant and animal species.	B3	1. Map the distribution of the nationally restricted plant species resurveying at appropriate intervals to monitor trends. 2. Estimate/count (where feasible) the abundance of plant species within each area of occurrence. Resurvey at intervals to monitor trends. 3. Where possible, investigate and record factors affecting or appearing to affect abundance or distribution. 4. Encourage specialists to study and evaluat the rare and notable invertebrate species occurring on the reserve. 5. Carry out management changes to encourage species where indicated by monitoring.
3. Encourage the reversion of semi-improved pasture to calcicolous grassland.	A3 B3	1. Research and evaluate the factors affecting the recolonisation of chalk grasslanc species both on and off the reserve. 2. Carry out management to enhance recolonisation. 3. Monitor semi-improved plant communities.

OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVE	MANAGEMENT OPTION	OUTLINE PRESCRIPTION
4. Maintain and develop secondary wildlife habitats on the reserve.		1. Maintain existing areas of hawthorn and gorse scrub. 2. Maintain and develop areas of broadleaved woodland. 3. Maintain and establish dew ponds. 4. Maintain and establish hedges and scrub belts. 5. Maintain and establish areas of long vegetation. 6. Monitor wildlife of secondary habitats.
5. Re-establish breeding populations of rare and notable species formerly occurring on the reserve.		1. Study and evaluate the options for encouraging stone curlew. 2. Evaluate the suitability of the reserve for reintroducing Adonis blue. 3. Take appropriate action, based on these evaluations.
6. Protect the reserve from damage and disturbance.		1. Liaise with Police. 2. Evict coursers and other trespassers, if appropriate, where this involves no personal risk.

2.4.2.2 Legal and Other Obligations

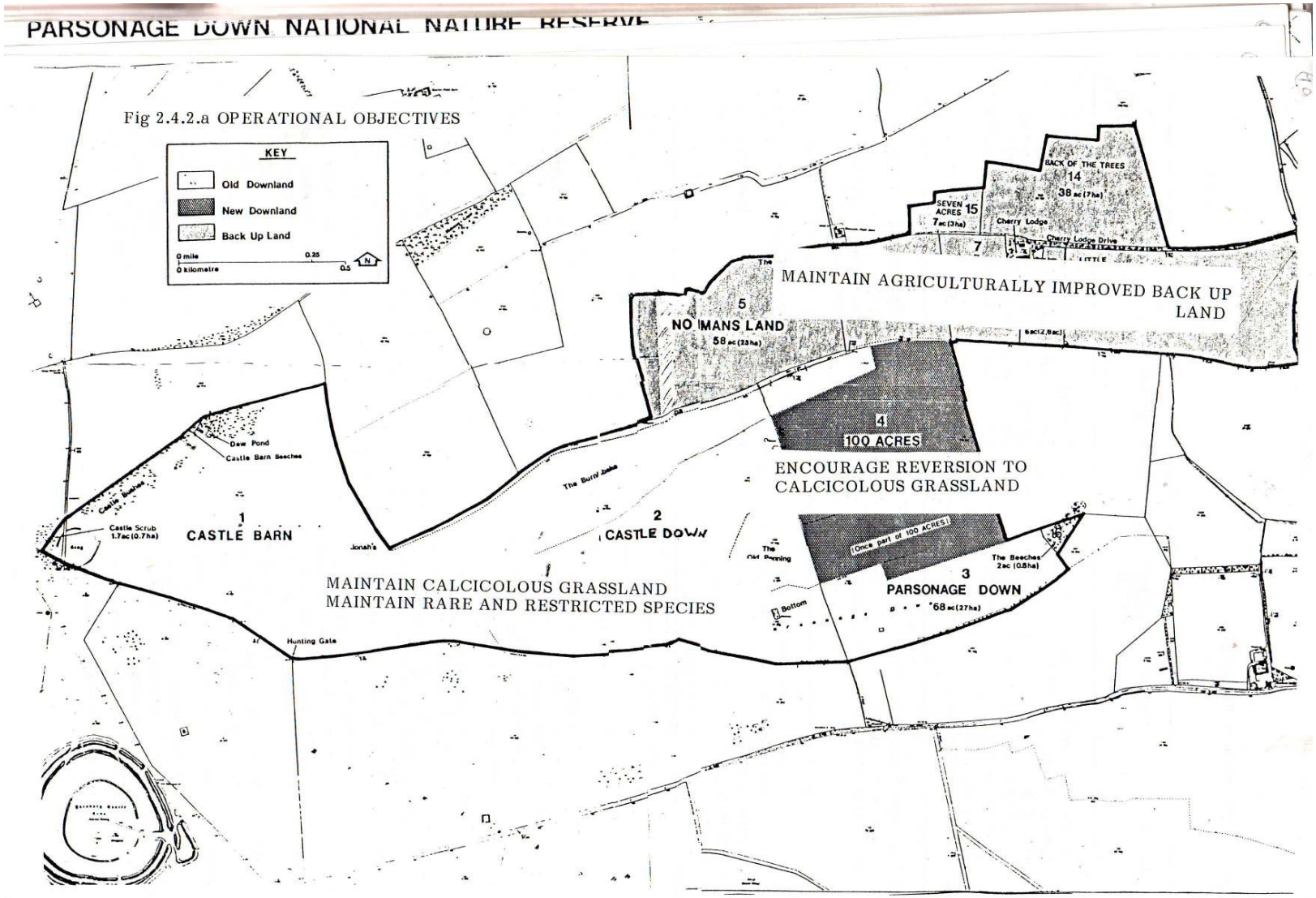
OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVE	MANAGEMENT OPTION	OUTLINE PRESCRIPTION
7. Maintain a working farm operating without cost to the public purse and preferably at a profit.		1. Rear additional livestock to exploit the extra grazing available. 2. Use marketable breeds of livestock such as the continental cross cattle and Scotch half-bred/Suffolk sheep. 3. Buy and sell livestock at optimum prices. 4. Maintain back-up pastures in a good state of productivity. 5. Aim for self sufficiency in hay production. 6. Maintain accurate book-keeping and accounts. 7. Review the farming system regularly to assess profitability.
8. Maintain small pure bred herd of longhorn cattle.		1. Keep a maximum of 15 breeding cows. 2. Maintain membership of the Longhorn Society.
9. Meet the requirements of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979.		1. Avoid damage to Scheduled Ancient Monuments and other archaeological features. 2. Co-operate with the Ancient Monuments Inspectors.
10. Meet legal requirements incurred as a land owner.		1. Identify and assess potential hazards occurring on the reserve. 2. Protect visitors to the reserve by taking necessary safety measures.
11. Meet the legal requirements incurred as an employer.		1. Follow health and safety procedures laid down in the NCC Safety Handbook and South Region Policy Statement. 2. Carry out regular safety inspections.
12. Meet the legal requirements incurred as an agricultural holding.		1. Adhere to legislation concerning stock rearing, medication, disease control and movements. 2. Control weeds as specified in the 1959 Weeds Act. 3. Control pests especially rabbits and prevent them damaging crops.
13. Maintain good relations with neighbours and the local community.		1. Liaise with neighbouring farmers and the Military over boundaries and other issues. 2. Give local groups (schools, WI) preferential treatment in interpretive programme.

2.4.2.3 Provision of Facilities

OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVE	MANAGEMENT OPTION	OUTLINE PRESCRIPTION
14. Promote the use of the reserve for the demonstration of low intensity agriculture and conservation management primarily to the agricultural community.		1. Maintain the working farm with back-up land, stock and farm infrastructure. 2. Provide facilities for guided group visits. 3. Encourage visits by targeted groups. 4. Provide leaflets and display material.
15. Encourage research by suitable organisations and individuals outside NCC.		1. Make contacts with educational and research establishments. 2. Suggest appropriate research projects and maintain a research register.
16. Provide limited facilities for visits by conservation organisations and interested individuals.		1. Provide facilities for guided group visits and open days. 2. Provide leaflets and display material.

PARSONAGE DOWN NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

Fig 2.4.2.a OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES



PARSONAGE DOWN NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

Fig 2.4.2.b OUTLINE PRESCRIPTIONS