

YELLOW MARSH SAXIFRAGE *Saxifraga hirculus* SPECIES ACTION PLAN

DESCRIPTION

Yellow marsh saxifrage *Saxifraga hirculus* was first discovered growing in a bog at Knutsford, Cheshire in the early 18th Century. However, in Britain as well as across the rest of its European range it has declined as the result of agricultural drainage over the last 200 years. Yellow marsh saxifrage is now a montane plant in Britain as all its lowland habitats have been lost. Outside Europe the species can be found growing in arctic regions and the mountains of Asia and North America.

It is a plant of base rich flushes and mires which spreads by creeping runners that detach from the parent plant after 1-2 years. The bright yellow flowers are borne on slender, upright flowering shoots. It flowers from July to September with the flowers being insect pollinated.

LOCAL BIODIVERSITY IMPORTANCE

The yellow marsh saxifrage is now restricted to approximately 20 sites in Britain. The northern Pennines is the main area for the species, holding 80–90% of the population. The most southerly point of its British range is within the Yorkshire Dales National Park in base-rich flushes on the slopes of Great Shunner Fell which lies on the watershed between upper Wensleydale and upper Swaledale. This site falls within Mallerstang–Swaledale Head Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), which is also a component part of the North Pennine Moors candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC). Yellow marsh saxifrage is one of the European interest features listed in the cSAC citation.

NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL BIODIVERSITY IMPORTANCE

Yellow marsh saxifrage is declining and threatened throughout its European range. It is listed in Annexes II and IV of the EC Habitats Directive, and Appendix I of the Berne Convention. In the UK it is protected under Schedule 4 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations 1994 and Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

CURRENT ISSUES, OPPORTUNITIES & THREATS

The habitats in which yellow marsh saxifrage occurs require grazing which is neither so heavy that the often scarce flowers are removed, nor so light that there is no bare ground for seedlings to establish or that the plant suffers from competition with other more vigorous grasses and sedges.

Drainage, afforestation and intensification of agricultural management may be threats to some British populations, but in the Yorkshire Dales National Park the population lies within a statutory site where, of the above three issues, it is only grazing management which is likely to have a direct effect on the population.

AIMS OF THE SPECIES ACTION PLAN

- To ensure that the Great Shunner Fell population of yellow marsh saxifrage in the Yorkshire Dales National Park is self-sustaining by providing ideal conditions for the plant to naturally thrive.
- Determine the feasibility of re-introducing the species to other suitable sites within the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

OBJECTIVES

To achieve these aims we need to:

- Ensure all known sites are in favourable management.
- Continue regular and detailed monitoring of existing populations and contribute to ongoing autecological studies.
- Support the work of the Yellow Marsh Saxifrage National Steering Group and, where appropriate to the Yorkshire Dales population, implement any recommendations by the Group (eg for site management).
- Support existing *ex situ* conservation techniques to protect genetic diversity and to provide experimental material (and as a source of plants for (re) introductions should this be necessary in the future).

ACTIONS & TARGETS

To achieve these objectives the following actions should be carried out and the targets achieved within the time-scale given:

Actions	Target date	3 year cost £
Determine the current status of yellow marsh saxifrage in the Yorkshire Dales National Park by surveying all extant, former and potential sites.	2002	No additional cost
Devise and implement an annual monitoring programme	2004	£1,000
Working in partnership with landowners and land managers, and through the use of management grants and advice, ensure Yorkshire Dales population is under favourable management.	2003	Officer Time
Collect and deposit seeds at the Kew National Seed Bank at Wakehurst Place for <i>ex situ</i> conservation work.	Done	No additional cost

WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ACTION PLAN?

Lead Agency	Key Partners
Scottish Natural Heritage	English Nature Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority DEFRA/RDS Landowners and managers

