



# What influence does stakeholder assessment have on the management of floodplain meadow grasslands?



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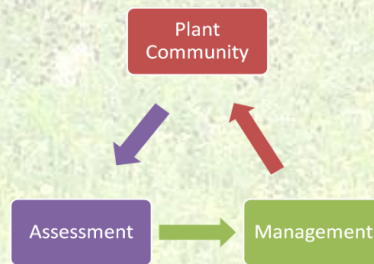
## The Question

Stakeholders involved in the management of floodplain meadows cite a range of reasons why they wish to conserve them, ranging from their species-rich sward and the presence of uncommon or threatened species, to their cultural and historical heritage value. Key drivers of the botanical composition of meadows include site hydrology, soil nutrient stores and fluxes, and management, both agricultural operations as well as operations to manipulate the other drivers.

Conservationists responsible for meadows consider on-going monitoring to be key to assessing the success or otherwise of management, following a responsive management model. Yet how do stakeholders assess meadow condition and management and use this knowledge to evaluate the meadows and determine the required management operations?



Baling the hay at Mottey Meadows, Staffordshire



## Aims and Methods

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to investigate who the various stakeholders involved in the management of floodplain meadows are, and what they want from the meadows. What do they consider to be 'good' and 'bad' condition and what ideas do they hold about meadow management, particularly 'traditional' management? How do such ideas influence decisions about meadow management at various points during the year?

From an ecological perspective meadow management represents a form of disturbance yet it is also a human practice with social, economic and cultural drivers. For this reason, an interdisciplinary approach with a case study and mixed methods strategy was adopted, drawing on quantitative data from field survey work, but also strongly on the methods used by social scientists to generate understandings about social practices.



Photo: Mike Dodd (OU)

## Results and Conclusions

Conservationists and farmers hold contrasting views on the meaning and value of floodplain meadows, and on 'traditional' management practices, which are sometimes in conflict.

Differential power relations result in conservationists' narratives being mobilised in assessments that focus on botanical composition, leading to a partial view of the meadows that discounts the agricultural value for which they were originally created.

The lack of recording of meadow management undermines scope for responsive management such that assessments often do not lead to specific conclusions regarding management, and there is a tendency to fall back onto a 'traditional' management model of prescriptions with their own inherent uncertainties.

The partial view of meadow value may in turn be undermining the social and economic drivers of management and farmers' motivations to be involved in floodplain meadow management. Similarly, prescriptive views of management may undermine the flexibility and so resilience of meadow management with regards to its socio-economic drivers. This therefore could enhance the risk of under-management and ultimately abandonment at many meadow sites and may ultimately constitute the greatest threat to meadow conservation.



Counting snake-head fritillaries *Fritillaria meleagris* at North Meadow, Wiltshire