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ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE WELSH UPLANDS
AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT

James, T

Welsh Archaeological Trusts
for
CADW: Welsh Historic Monuments

INTRODUCTION

Upland Wales contains a rich archaeological, historical and environmental heritage which at present is little known and probably less understood. To date there has been little systematic fieldwork to assess the nature and value of the resource in academic, conservation, interpretation, management and rescue archaeology contexts. If this heritage is to be saved, preserved, managed and presented to the public in the twenty-first century then the last decade of the twentieth century must be the time for the completion of the essential groundwork.

In recent years the Countryside Commission and the Council for British Archaeology have considered attitudes towards uplands and in 1988 Cadw:Welsh Historic Monuments rightly acknowledged the need for an assessment of the current state of knowledge of upland archaeology. Cadw commissioned the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts to produce evaluation reports of the areas under their care.

This joint statement by the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts reflects a general concern over the asset represented by upland archaeology and should be regarded as an introduction to the detailed regional studies.

THE UPLANDS

Extent

The Welsh Archaeological Trusts have restricted their assessments of uplands to the definition used by the Countryside Commission of land over 244m (800ft). There are almost 8000 km² of upland representing 37% of the land mass of Wales. The Trusts are aware that in archaeological terms the 244m altitude is artificial as local combinations of topography, aspect, soil cover, vegetation, climate and exposure create conditions for settlement and farming comparable with uplands at much lower altitudes. This lower land of upland character should be included in any future upland initiative. No figures have been calculated for this additional land but it would be reasonable to assume it forms another 10-15% of land surface. On that assumption about half of Wales is either upland or of upland character.

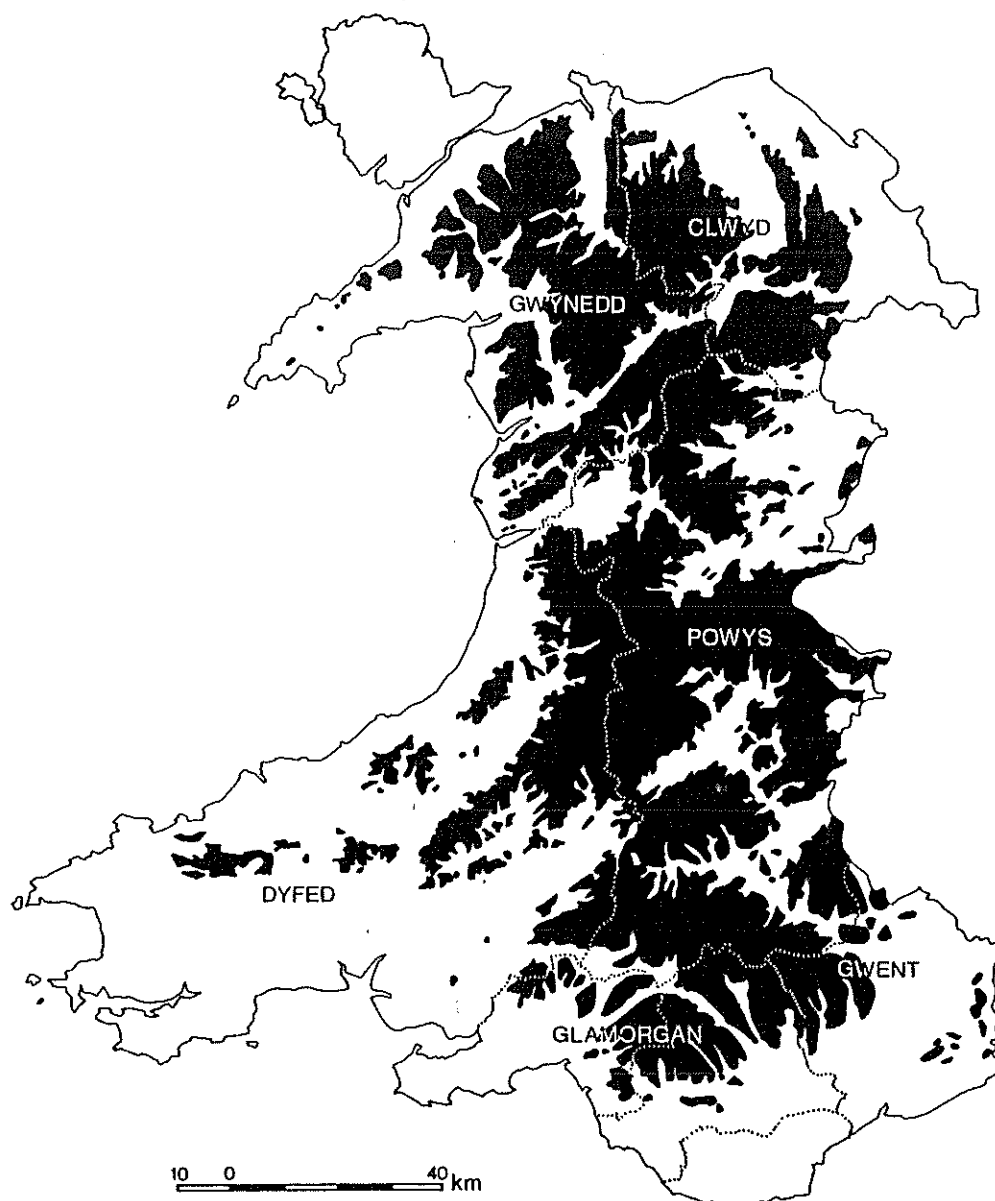


Fig. 1. Land over 800 feet in Wales

The character of upland archaeology

Archaeology in the uplands usually manifests itself in combinations of piles of stones and heaps of earth which are interpreted amongst other things as cairns for burial and for land clearance, as permanent settlements, as hafotai relating to summer pasture, as hillforts, as field systems and as sites of industrial archaeology from prehistoric times to the recent past. The surviving visible remains reflect periods and conditions when construction was of stone yet recent excavations have shown that many stone-built sites were built on earlier timber versions. This poses the question as to how many sites were constructed only in timber and are not detectable by techniques of surface

search. Human exploitation of the uplands has varied in scale and intensity often reflecting periods of climatic variation. There seems to be no upper limit to where archaeological remains can be found: settlements are known as high as 530m and cairns are found on the highest peaks.

The uplands contain not just sites but entire landscapes which provide information on the successive organisation of communities. The physical remains in the uplands are usually very well preserved as they have not been subject to the pressures of modern arable agriculture. Various factors in the past have led, at times, to man retreating from the uplands but the very existence of extensive settlements and field systems is a reflection of past success in exploiting the uplands.

Upland archaeology allows the study of the rise, success and decline of land exploitation creating physical evidence relatively undisturbed by later development.

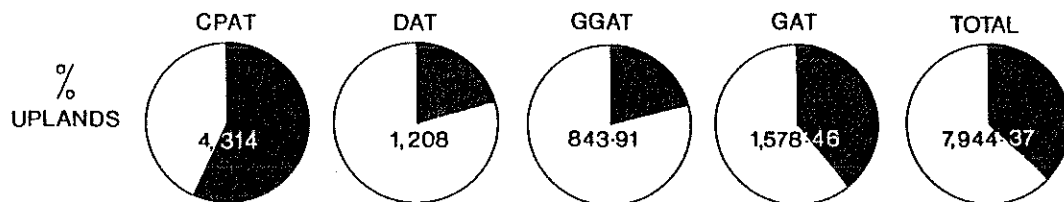


Fig. 2. The area in km² of uplands as a percentage of the area administered by each Trust.

CPAT= Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust. GAT=Gwynedd Archaeological Trust
 DAT=Dyfed Archaeological Trust. GGAT=Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust

Land Use in the Uplands

Land use or ownership in the uplands is difficult to quantify. Calculations by the Trusts show just over 1000 km² of woodland in the uplands (11%).

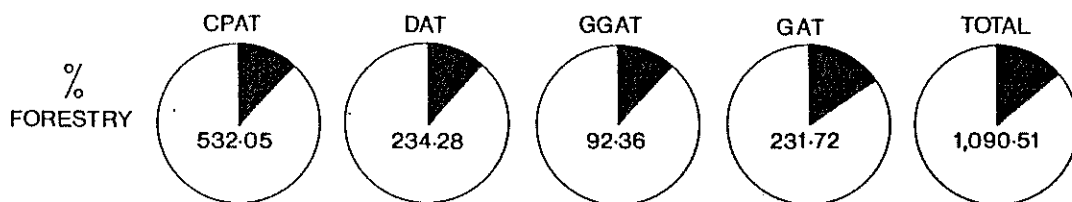


Fig.3. Area in km² of woodland as a percentage of the upland area covered by each archaeological Trust

Welsh Office Agriculture Department figures for Area A land within the Less Favoured Area, the closest comparable area for land over 244m, has a much smaller figure for forestry but shows about half the area is permanent grass, one third is rough grazing with sole rights and one eighth is arable. The arable presumably relates to land generally below the 800 feet contour. If the figures, excluding arable, can be related to the uplands then perhaps 80% is permanent grass or rough pasture. In Dyfed it has been shown that the amount of rough pasture has decreased over the last forty years as it has been improved. Improvement of rough grazing will slow with the removal of grant support. Not all the Trusts have identified figures for common or enclosed land but one possible succession that might be discernible for common land is from dereliction through enclosure to forestry.

Major land-holdings include 290 km² (3.5%) by Welsh Water and 240 km² (3%) by the National Trust. The National Trust has a programme of searching its estates with a view to their proper management.

DESIGNATED LAND and STATUTORY PROTECTIONS

National Parks

The Snowdonia, Brecon Beacons and Pembrokeshire Coast National Parks contain almost 2800 km² of upland - just over one third of upland Wales. Among other responsibilities the National Park Authorities have a duty to preserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Parks. Guidelines issued in 1986 by the Countryside Commission on the interpretation of the Wildlife and Countryside Acts of 1981 and 1985, as applied to Section 3 Conservation Maps of National Parks, specifically list archaeology as a factor affecting natural beauty. The Park Authorities are accordingly empowered to take active steps to promote archaeological conservation. All three Welsh National Parks have archaeological officers with varying degrees of responsibility.

Environmentally Sensitive Areas

The Cambrian Mountains ESA covers about 1160 km² of upland in Dyfed and Powys and the Llyn ESA about 20 km². The ESAs' management agreements encourages farmers to manage their property in a manner which is sympathetic to the natural habitat and avoid damage to known, listed, archaeological sites. Unfortunately, there is no mechanism for incorporating information on newly recorded sites.

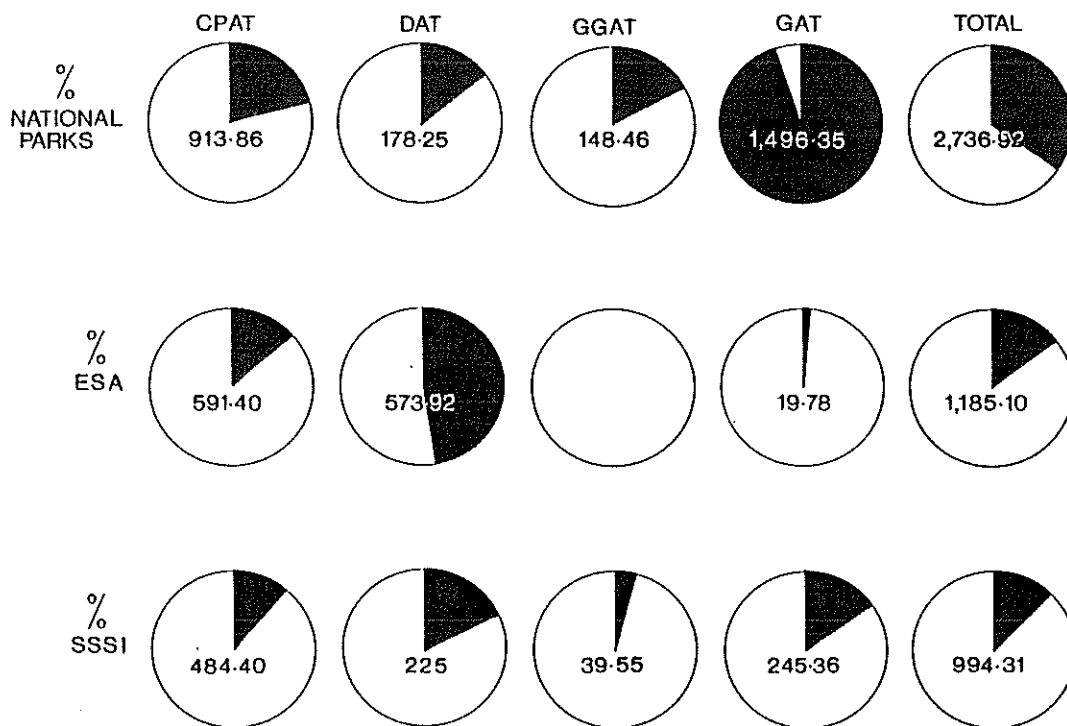


Fig. 4. The area in km^2 of National Parks, Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Sites of Special Scientific Interest as a percentage of the upland covered by each Trust.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

These cover almost 1000 km^2 of upland Wales but while management regimes for wildlife and habitat conservation may coincidentally protect ancient monuments there is no specific archaeological provision. However, where palaeoenvironmental value is listed in the notice of designation this can be relevant to archaeological interests.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

These cover 180 km^2 , less than 2.5% of upland, and are established to conserve the natural beauty and character of an area. Again archaeological sites and landscapes may incidentally be afforded protection.

Areas of Archaeological Importance and Scheduled Ancient Monuments

No areas have been or are likely to be designated as archaeologically important under the relevant legislation. There are 645 Scheduled Ancient Monuments in the uplands out of a total of 9,162 sites which are currently recorded.

Planning Legislation

Planning legislation provides some scope for controlling development in the uplands and includes the recent provision which demands the preparation of environmental statements in certain cases. Archaeology and the cultural heritage are material considerations in the planning process but the application of planning legislation has limited value for upland archaeology.

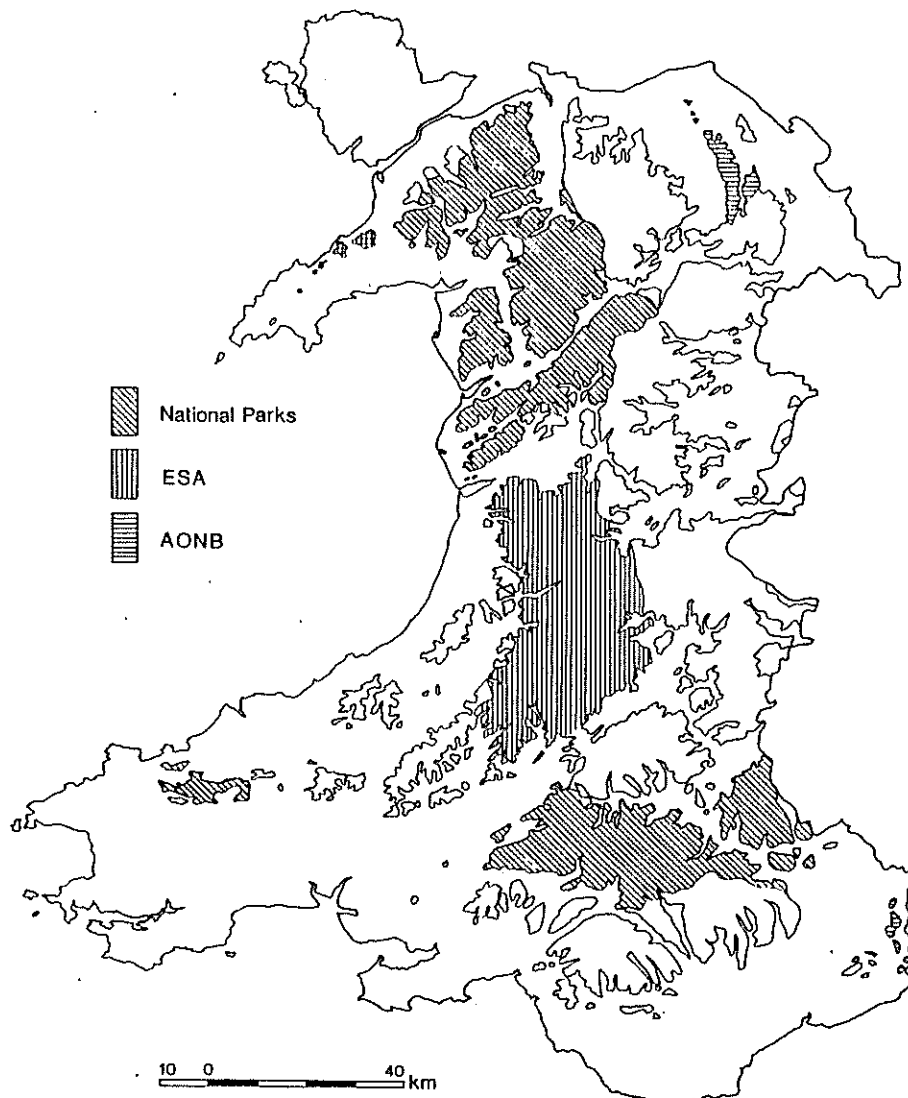


Fig. 5. National Parks, Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty within the uplands of Wales.

THE THREATS TO THE UPLANDS

Large scale threats to the uplands from the construction of reservoirs, pipelines, access roads, general road improvements, mining, quarrying and land reclamation can be monitored and become the subject of an appropriate archaeological response.

General agricultural works or improvements and erosion by natural and human agencies constitute persistent and destructive threats. The proximity of large urban populations and the associated pressures on the uplands are a cause of concern in some areas. These threats are difficult to quantify, monitor and avert. Pasture improvement has been one of the threats to the uplands. The reduction in grain subsidies and the possible increase in lowland sheep farming is likely to lead to alternative land uses which may create more extensive damage than current grazing not subject to pasture improvement.

Forestry and its related operations are likely to remain among the most consistently destructive activities in the uplands. It is hard to predict the future rate of new forestry planting although the Forestry Commission had 11 km² of land to be planted in Wales at the end of March 1987. Clear felling of original stock is now taking place and restocking has been running at about 20 km² a year. The introduction of the Woodland Grants Scheme saw an increase in the level of grant available, even if this was balanced by the reduction in tax advantage. The government wants to see more forestry. The Secretary of State for the Environment has indicated that large-scale conifer planting is no longer acceptable in the English uplands but that Wales and Scotland would accommodate the expansion of forestry at the rate of 33,000 hectares a year.

CURRENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

The Welsh Archaeological Trusts hold records of almost 9200 upland sites, about 20% of the total recorded for the whole of Wales. There are 645 (7%) protected as Scheduled Ancient Monuments under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. There are thus 1.15 sites recorded per km² of upland on the basis of present knowledge.

The records held by the Trusts are generally based on the earlier work of the Ordnance Survey, the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (RCAHMW), other published sources,

individual fieldworkers and the Trusts' own fieldwork. The RCAHMMW has recorded a large number of secular buildings in upland Wales. The most recent RCAHMMW volume directly relevant to upland archaeology was Brecon I, ii (Hill-forts and Roman Remains) published in 1987. Work is well advanced on the volume covering earlier prehistoric Brecon and survey is also advanced in Radnorshire. In addition non-inventory survey work has been carried out in various parts of upland Wales. The National Archaeological Survey (NAS) has been engaged in a detailed survey of uplands in the Brecon Beacons and Black Mountain which has led to significant gains in knowledge. It appears, however, that over half of Wales has either not been surveyed by RCAHMMW or has not been investigated for over 50 years. The Trusts themselves have done a variety of surveys to different standards and for different purposes, but there has been nothing approaching a modern, nationwide and systematic approach to searching the uplands for archaeological sites and landscapes.

The NAS and Trusts' surveys have consistently demonstrated that the existing archaeological record is inadequate and new sites are awaiting discovery.

As part of the upland assessment in 1988, for example, the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust searched six sample upland areas and in simple numeric terms increased the number of sites from 19 to 405, a 2,100% increase. The gains were qualitative and well as quantitative with two examples of settlements and field systems covering at least 7 and 12 hectares.

A detailed search of the uplands is likely to record 3 or 4 times as many sites as are already known, perhaps making a total of 27,000 - 35,000 sites in the uplands. Integral systems of fields and settlements can be anticipated which will shed much light on prehistoric and historic exploitation of the uplands.

The Trusts' records show that only about fifty upland sites have been investigated in the last twenty years. Few have been excavated on any scale, and most represent relatively minor pieces of work. Three-quarters have been on prehistoric sites, mainly cairns and hillforts. Most of these excavations have been site specific and only occasionally have there been more than token attempts to place an excavated site in the context of a broader landscape. As with survey, the excavations demonstrate a range of purposes and results but have not generally been related to regional strategies.

The inadequacy of the recorded archaeology, as opposed to the

potential of the unrecorded remains, leads to considerable gaps in our comprehension of many of the dynamics of man's past activities. Seasonality and transhumance, the interaction between lowland and upland, social organisation and the organisation of the exploitation of natural resources are just some of the little understood areas.

Current Knowledge of Environmental Archaeology

The extensive deposits of peat, often developing from the Bronze Age or even earlier, may well have buried archaeological features. However, the predominance of peats and acid soils offers considerable potential for palaeoenvironmental reconstruction and for setting archaeological evidence in its landscape context.

Most of the environmental work undertaken in the uplands consists of pollen studies, the majority of which have been carried out independently of archaeological work. These have quite frequently involved making assumptions about the correlation between vegetational changes, human activity and their causal relationships, particularly when the changes themselves have often not been independently dated.

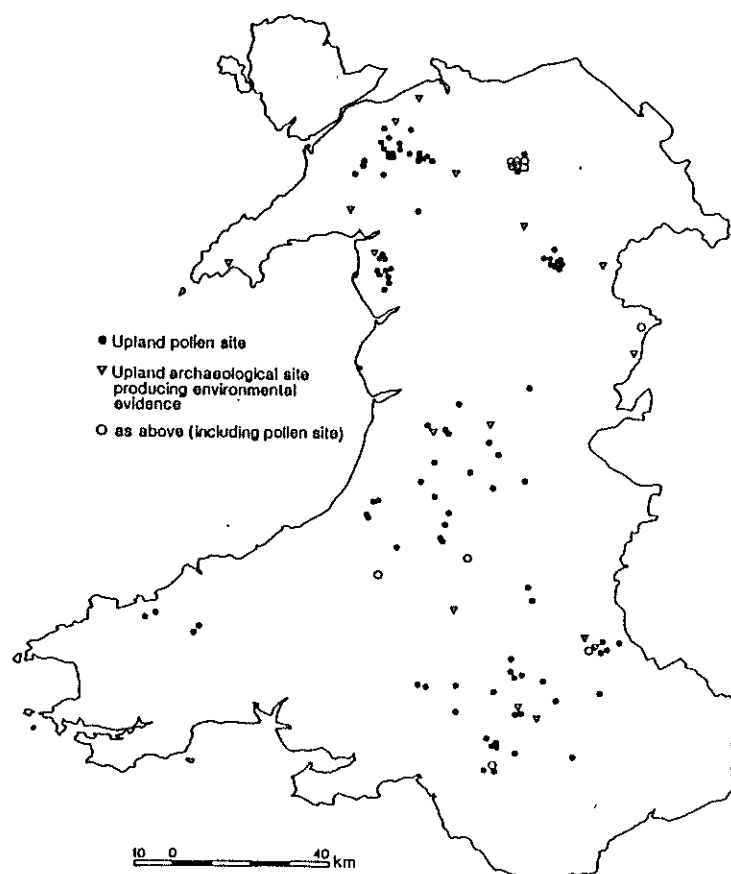


Fig. 6. The distribution of pollen samples from general and archaeological sites and of archaeological sites producing environmental evidence.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

The establishment of a comprehensive record of the archaeology of upland Wales is a fundamental priority for understanding the past and for conserving what still remains for the future. Palaeoenvironmental study and the conservation of environmental deposits will clearly form a vital element of any future programme.

Areas of interest in academic terms include:

- the extent and chronology of upland exploitation;

- the correlation between upland settlement and climatic change;

- regional variations in the character of upland land use;

- and the interaction between lowland and upland economic systems.

In terms of conservation there is a clear necessity for greater communication and explanation of the value and fragile nature of the upland cultural resource to all other organisations active in the uplands, with a view to ensuring that more sites and areas of archaeological interest are properly protected. This requires the development of more specific conservation strategies for the historic environment supported by local management programmes.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

The comprehensive programme of recording, analysis, excavation, interpretation and protection which upland archaeology in Wales clearly merits, will most readily be achieved by a co-ordinated programme involving all interested parties.

A strategic plan for the Welsh uplands needs to be developed as a matter of extreme urgency and a small strategic planning group should monitor and where necessary revise the programme.

Plan preparation and the programme emanating from it will need to be properly resourced. In any strategic plan the primary

objectives must include the protection and conservation of the archaeological resource. Collection of information on upland

archaeology, its analysis and dissemination, is a priority and the relationship between this and the management of the resource must be explored and clearly defined.

The roles of the Trusts, CADW, RCAHMW, University Colleges, the National Trust and local archaeological societies will need to be clearly defined in order to maximise the available resources.

Various points which emerged from the separate studies undertaken by the Welsh Archaeological Trusts in 1988 cover some of the issues which might assist in the the formulation and application of a strategic plan. These are summarised in no particular order.

1. For the purpose of interpretation and preservation an attempt should be made to record all evidence of past human activity in areas selected for examination. Study methods should include a broad spectrum of available techniques, including field search, detailed field survey, aerial photography, documentary and placename research. The development of an efficient and nationally consistent recording system will also clearly be desirable.
2. To understand what is being scheduled, conserved and managed it is anticipated that a number of small scale excavations will be needed to determine the nature and date of certain types of sites and landscapes. Experiments with a system of point scoring for landscapes relating to site preservation, condition, rarity, vulnerability and group value should assist in aiding the sensible increase in the number of Scheduled Ancient Monuments which is needed.
3. Programmes of threat-led rescue excavation and recording should attempt to place the results within the context of the broader landscape, and should involve environmental analysis and assessment wherever possible.
4. Forestry will remain a long-term problem but there now exists goodwill and a spirit of cooperation between the Forestry Commission and the archaeological world. To enable this goodwill to be translated into action the Forestry Commission should provide the finance for archaeological assessments within its own new plantations and for proposals under the Woodland Grants Scheme, also for any restocking programme. The private forestry sector should also be encouraged to adopt a more sympathetic and responsible attitude towards funding archaeological work created by their activities.

*Countryside Council with
wide powers.*

5. The Countryside Commission and The Nature Conservancy Council and in due course the new joint agency should be encouraged to commission archaeological surveys of Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Nature Reserves and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, both existing and proposed designations.
6. Welsh Office Agricultural Division should integrate the cultural heritage more fully into its work particularly with regard to farm management plans, grant applications and other agricultural operations. The Llyn and Cambrian Mountains Environmentally Sensitive Areas should receive a more sympathetic archaeological input. The Welsh Office Agricultural Division should commission archaeological input into many of these schemes.
7. There is a need for closer understanding about the archaeological heritage with organisations such as the Country Landowners Association, the National Farmers Union (Wales) and the Farmers Union of Wales. Awareness must be developed of the need to incorporate archaeological remains into management plans suitable for Capital Transfer Tax Exemption schemes and that archaeological surveys and management strategies can be commissioned.
8. The position of Cadw within the Welsh Office provides it with the opportunity to press other Welsh Office Divisions to accept more responsible attitudes towards both archaeology and its funding. Cadw should also use its considerable influence to help generate a generally more favourable climate of opinion towards the physical attributes of the cultural heritage.
9. Since survey and recording will be priorities, the RCAHMS, as well as undertaking work on their own behalf may also have an important role to play in training and servicing other groups wishing to carry out analytical field survey and aerial photography, and in monitoring the quality of work undertaken. RCAHMS holds the National Archaeological Record.
10. The University Colleges have an active and creative role to play in upland archaeology. They are uniquely placed to generate an enquiring and collaborative stimulus towards all aspects of man's past activity in the uplands by drawing upon a broad range of disciplines including plant science, geography, geology and computer science. Co-ordinated programmes of an intensive nature in a localised area will help generate useful models for other areas.

*need for
for initiatives
from archaeology
to inform
N.C.*

11. Local archaeological societies, well informed and knowledgeable of quite specific areas, have a potentially important role to play in supporting a national programme of work. They are well placed to monitor changes in land use and threats to archaeological sites which might otherwise go unnoticed and to inform the Trusts who may be able to mount a rapid response.
12. Following the rapid assessment of its archaeological holdings the National Trust is in a prime position to establish exemplary management agreements. It is hoped that the National Parks will develop their positive attitudes to archaeological management and presentation. They should be encouraged within a strategic plan to undertake or commission archaeological surveys.
13. Each of the Welsh Archaeological Trusts maintain records of sites and monuments in their respective areas, and have developed close links with various relevant bodies. Given adequate funding, they are all well placed to identify, monitor and react to local priorities for rescue survey, excavation and recording within a nationally agreed framework.

14. Local Authorities

unrealistic

This has some basis for the hierarchy of objectives for an upland plan - but needs to be re-organised.

— The aim of future archaeological work in upland Wales must be to record all evidence of human activity up to the recent past with a view to:-

understanding the evolution of the landscape, and man's role within it, over the last 7,000 years;

extending our knowledge of the physical evidence of past human activity;

conserving an academically appropriate resource for the future;

developing conservation strategies from an intelligent and intelligible data base to protect archaeological and environmental sites and landscapes;

initiating, where preservation is not possible, programmes of rescue archaeology with a sound academic basis in the light of national priorities;

explaining and interpreting man's past activities in the uplands to a wider audience;

and contributing towards a comprehensive, computerised and integrated archaeological record for Wales.

This aim could be pursued by various means including:-

establishment of a forum for upland archaeology in Wales and the preparation of a strategic plan with clear policies and objectives;

efficient management of all resources, human and equipment, with annual reviews of progress against the targets set in the strategic plan;

the initiation of rapid search and recording programmes in response to plan objectives;

the development of programmes of detailed archaeological and environmental studies;

the encouragement of studies for management and conservation proposals;

enhancing the resources available for upland archaeology from all parties whose activities have an impact in the uplands or whose responsibilities involve the conservation of upland archaeology.

