

Controlling bracken over archaeological sites and areas

Why is bracken a problem on archaeological sites?

Bracken is continuing to colonise large areas of Scotland, especially in the South and West. The reasons for this are caused both by climate change and changing trends in cropping and stock husbandry. This expansion is having severe impacts on both archaeological sites and historic landscapes.

When fully grown bracken hides archaeological sites, making many areas only visible in the winter and early spring. It obscures the subtle differences that show how the land was used. As bracken prefers to colonise both enriched and broken ground it often preferentially selects archaeological areas to colonise as new sites.

Bracken roots (known as rhizomes) are particularly destructive to buried archaeological deposits. Because they penetrate much deeper than grass roots and are larger in size they generally mix archaeological soils to such an extent that individual features and deposits are impossible to distinguish and lose much of their archaeological value.

Bracken is, therefore best controlled before it becomes too heavily established, though there



This building is only visible because the bracken around it has been trampled down.



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Within this sea of bracken can be seen the heavily obscured remains of two prehistoric roundhouses. The associated features and detail of the house structure are now hidden and severe disturbance (bioturbation) of the buried archaeological deposits will also be occurring.

can still be considerable landscape and pastoral benefit in removing bracken from badly infested sites. By maintaining grazing on archaeological sites cleared of bracken, they can be more readily appreciated as important cultural landscapes.

What should I do to protect archaeological sites from bracken?

Bracken is best controlled either by cutting or spraying, though cutting has to be repeated over at least 5 years to make a significant effect on a badly infested area. Neither method should involve physical damage to upstanding remains. Both methods can be funded under the Rural Priorities Scheme but with a primary aim of habitat management.

The use of chemical sprays must be assessed against its possible impact on archaeological deposits as well as biodiversity and water courses. No detailed research has yet been published of the impact of such sprays on archaeological deposits and artefacts and therefore Archaeology Scotland can only recommend that best judgement be used where a perceived risk might be identified.

Much of Scotland's archaeological heritage lies in rural areas. This sheet is one of a series giving advice on some of the ways these important remains can be protected during normal rural land management.

GOOD PRACTICE

- Identify & map the full extent of archaeological sites before carrying out bracken control - preferably in the winter or early spring when these sites are most visible.
 - use [PASTMAP](#) to identify known sites & [HLAMAP](#) to help identify archaeological areas
 - consult your local authority archaeological service if you need more detailed information
- Make an assessment of the likely impacts of control - e.g. will increased visibility of monuments make them more vulnerable to stock or weather damage.
- Recognise future management impacts and plan your actions accordingly.
- When selecting boundaries for areas of treatment or cutting try to fit into existing or previous landscape forms.
- When using a machine to control bracken by either mechanical methods or by spraying, make sure that upstanding archaeology is not damaged.
- Follow SEARS Best Practice Guide when using chemicals to spray bracken and check with [SEPA](#) for a licence to carry out such work.

Further information - see

[Bracken Control A Guide to Best Practice](#), a SEARS publication can be found on the SNH Publications website page.

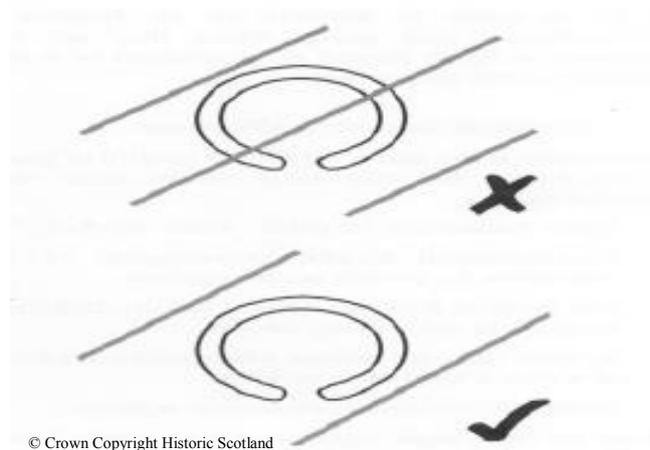
Historic Scotland's 48 page publication [TAN 17 Bracken and Archaeology](#) [1999] is available free online.

The [Heather Trust](#), co-ordinate the [Bracken Control Group](#). As stated, above there are issues about the continuing use of ASULAM, the only chemical currently available to control bracken.



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Bracken rhizomes can seriously obscure and destroy archaeological deposits. Bracken will not be eradicated from a site until the rhizomes as well as the surface fronds are killed.



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When spraying bracken by machine such as with an ATV make sure you avoid driving over archaeological structures and walls.