



B. Gibbons

Greater water-parsnip - *Sium latifolium*

This large plant is a member of the carrot family and, as such, is characterised by the small flowers being grouped into distinctive umbrella-like clusters (or umbels). Greater water-parsnip grows to around 2m tall and has a hairless ridged hollow stem. It produces umbels of white flowers between July and August, followed by egg-shaped fruits around 3mm long, with obvious ridges. The plant is a perennial and individuals can live for up to 10 years; it's also poisonous to humans.

Greater Water-parsnip is a species found in wet ditches and tall-herb fens and swamps. It grows in shallow, still or slow-moving water that is chalky and rich in nitrogen. It is able to grow with species such as common reed (*Phragmites australis*) or reed-mace (*Typha latifolia*) but does not grow under the shade of trees. The plant does not grow well if management includes heavy grazing or frequent cutting of the vegetation. However, it thrives in ditches where the water is kept open by occasional clearance with a bucket excavator or scythe.

In the past, Greater Water-parsnip was most commonly found on rafts of semi-floating vegetation at the margins of lakes and large rivers. However, since the drainage of fens in the UK, it is now mostly found in drainage ditches in the south and east of England.

The species has undergone a catastrophic decline in the last two hundred years, probably as a result of draining fens and the removal or over-engineering of watercourses. As such, Greater Water-parsnip is classified as Nationally Scarce in Great Britain, and is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan species.

In Kent, Greater Water-parsnip is rather local, being found in the south of the county only. It is still fairly frequent in and near the Military Canal and adjacent ditches near Appledore. The occurrence of the plant in Romney Marsh is likely to have declined in recent years, as more and more land is converted to arable farming, and many of the marsh ditches have been drained.

parsnip



The main threats to the continued existence of Greater Water-parsnip are associated with the frequent cleaning/excavating and over-straightening of ditches, as well as their drainage. Exposure to prolonged heavy grazing is also a problem, but equally the neglect of ditches, leading to reed and scrub invasion, is also a threat to the species.

Greater Water-parsnip grows on a small number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in south-west England. In Kent, the plant is found on Walland Marshes SSSI, which gives it partial protection against habitat destruction. In the long-term, the future survival of the species in the wider Kent countryside will depend on sympathetic management of ditches by land owners and managers. To this end, the UK Biodiversity Action Plan for the species is seeking to ensure that all land owners and managers of sites where Greater Water-parsnip is found are aware of the management needs of the plant.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

UK Biodiversity Action Plan: www.ukbap.org.uk

Environment Agency: www.environment-agency.gov.uk

English Nature: www.english-nature.org.uk

Kent County Council: www.kent.gov.uk/environment

Kent Wildlife Trust: www.kentwildlife.org.uk

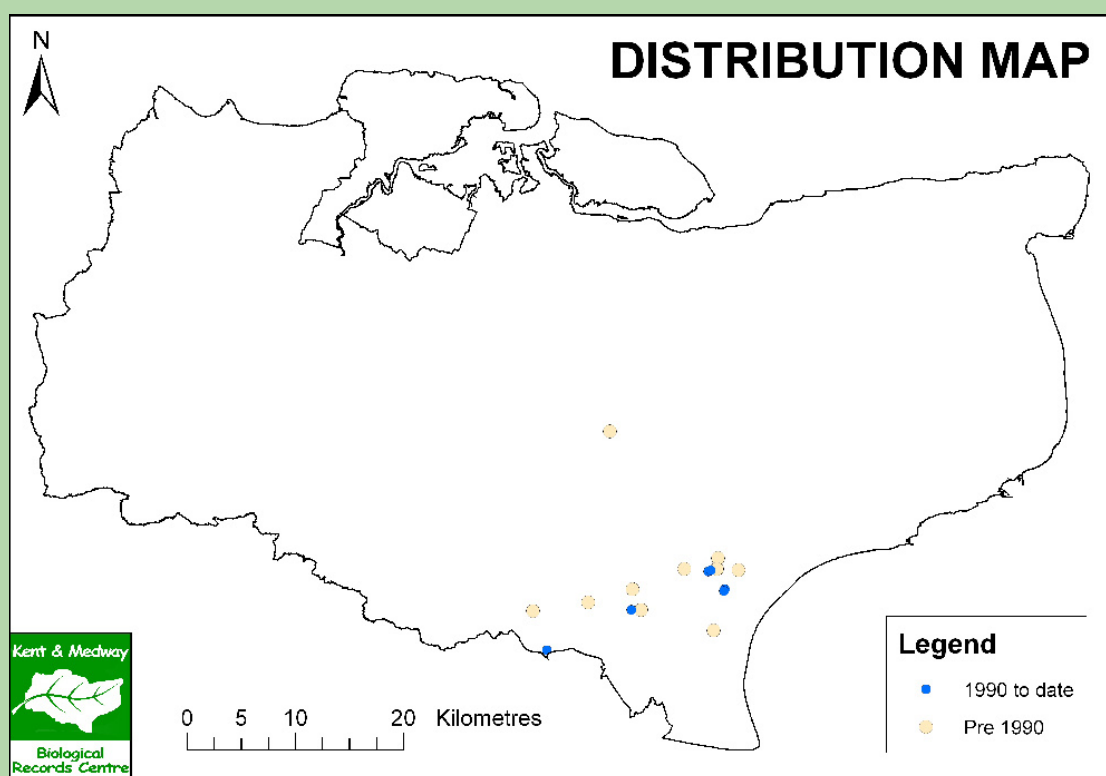
Kent Biodiversity Action Plan: www.kentbap.org.uk

The Kent Red Data Book, available from
Kent County Council: www.kent.gov.uk/biodiversity

Plantlife, the wild plant conservation charity:
www.plantlife.org.uk

Kent Landscape Information System:
www.kent.gov.uk/klis

Kent and Medway Biological Record Centre:
www.kmbrc.org.uk



Data courtesy of English Nature

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