

1. Welcome back again

This is the third HillPlan newsletter, some 16 months after the previous one back in September 2003. A recent spate of enquiries about the state of play with HillPlan has spurred me on to send out this newsletter update.

2. When will HillPlan be available?

The single most frequently asked question I get about HillPlan is: "When will HillPlan be available?" There are two main reasons why it has not been made generally available: credibility and usability. These issues need to be resolved before releasing HillPlan.

For HillPlan to be accepted within the wider community it needs to be properly validated using independent data (i.e. data not used to build the model itself). We have had considerable difficulties in obtaining grazing and vegetation data with the detail and over the time span required to validate the model. A number of data sets have been identified; but, as these data were generally collected for other purposes, they have had to be interpreted for use with the HillPlan model. We have also had to make various assumptions which reduce the confidence we have in the validation. To address this we are seeking further data sets which could be used for validating HillPlan and indeed we are building one with help from Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park (see below).

In order to use HillPlan effectively the user really needs expert knowledge of the model itself. In trials, untrained users tend to have problems in both setting up the model descriptions of farms and interpreting the model outputs. Releasing HillPlan without improving the usability would lead to frustration on the part of both the user and the developer.

Within the Macaulay Institute, however, we are using the model as part of contract work on studies of grazing impacts, where the data for the model can be gathered and entered by experienced users. The model outputs can then be interpreted with the aid of field ecologists familiar with the model (and its validation status) and the site in question. This is currently our preferred method of using HillPlan.

3. HillPlan development

Development work on HillPlan has more or less halted while we work on validating the model. However a couple of changes to the system are worth mentioning:

- HillPlan now runs under Windows XP.
- The Climate Model used by HillPlan has been enhanced to allow the interpolation of weather data from several nearby Met Stations rather than simply using the nearest one. The number of Met Stations used has also been increased (from 9 to 15 in Scotland).

4. HillPlan in Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park

The Park encompasses a number of farms and large areas of upland moor on the Clyde coast. Detailed grazing histories are available together with aerial photography and vegetation surveys - in short, an excellent data set for validating the HillPlan model. We are working in collaboration with Alasdair MacArthur, a ranger (who is also working on his PhD: "Remote sensing of upland heather dominated vegetation canopies" with Edinburgh University), on the characterisation of upland vegetation from near ground and aerial remote sensing data, and in gathering the vegetation and grazing data needed to run a validation test. We are hoping to have some results from this by the end of the year.

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