

Woodlands in England: Wildlife and Countryside Link's Manifesto June 2007

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) believes that **England's native woodlands have a vital role to play in the delivery of public benefits**, which can, and should be enhanced. This includes the protection and enhancement of biodiversity, the historic environment, landscape, and environmentally sustainable public access.

Our manifesto for England's woodland encompasses ancient and semi-natural woods, wood pasture and parkland, scrub and veteran trees. This includes the restoration from forestry operations of important semi-natural habitats, such as ancient woodland sites and lowland heathland at a UK-wide landscape scale to improve ecological sustainability.

There has been a **decline in the extent and environmental quality of our native woods**, this has negatively impacted UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority species, habitats and designated sites. Woodland loss, coniferisation, fragmentation and lapsed or inappropriate management are key factors and now we face the challenge of climate change.

The Future Challenge

- To successfully improve the environmental value of these woods requires a **targeted approach from policy making through to woodland management**. This needs more of England's native woods to be brought into appropriate active management.
- **The restoration and development of healthy woodland ecosystems is needed to enable the species and habitats they support to adapt to climate change – probably the most significant driver of woodland change in the future**. This requires retaining and enhancing the native woodland resource, through targeted management, expansion to protect fragments, improving the dispersal of priority species.
- Further ecological research, survey and monitoring work is needed to **understand the ecological changes to native woodland**, and the impacts of policies – not just forestry, but biodiversity, climate change, agriculture, land-use planning and energy.
- Improving the biodiversity condition of native woods, including for priority species and habitats, could **positively contribute to the delivery 'ecosystem services'** such as flood alleviation.
- We wish to see a **national objective of increased environmentally responsible access to native woods** underpinned by regional and local targets.
- We value the Government's commitment to international sustainable forestry as underpinned by the **UK Forestry Standard, and wish to see this applied to all grant-aided and state woodland work, including on farms and for woodfuel**.
- We value the nature conservation and timber traceability benefits that the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) offers. We would welcome further Government encouragement to owners to go beyond the UK Forestry Standard minimum, to **get more small or low-intensity managed native woods UKWAS certified**.

Wildlife and Countryside Link is a coalition of the UK's major environmental non-governmental organisations concerned with the conservation, enjoyment and protection of wildlife, the countryside and the marine environment. Our members have the support of over eight million people in the UK. Some Link organisations own and manage woodlands in England.

This manifesto is supported by the following organisations:

- Bat Conservation Trust
- Buglife – the Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- Council for British Archaeology
- Plantlife International
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- The Wildlife Trusts
- The Woodland Trust

Woodlands in England – background

The state of England’s native woodland resource

Native woodlands are now often in small isolated patches and in most cases the continuity of management has ceased. In the case of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS), the entire broadleaf characteristic has often been lost, with only small isolated remnant patches surviving.

This has resulted in the loss of notable species and often of whole assemblages of the woodland ecosystem. This situation: woodland loss, coniferisation, isolation and the cessation of traditional management has resulted in our native woodlands, both designated and undesignated, suffering from widespread decline of priority species. Species groups affected include woodland birds¹, Lepidoptera², bats³, plants⁴ and saproxylic invertebrates⁵. Nevertheless, in some areas, species that indicate continuity of past habitat conditions still exist. Where they do so, we should seek to maintain continuity through sensitive management.

The biodiversity of native woods can only be maintained, restored and enhanced, and UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP) habitat and species targets reached, if the diversity and dynamics of a healthy woodland ecosystem is improved. This requires targeted action both on designated and non-designated woodland sites.

We must ensure that the major drivers of change in terms of biodiversity loss, such as habitat loss, changes in management, diffuse pollution and the future challenge of climate change, are addressed. Woods must be able to provide the conditions so a range of woodland species have the space they need to adapt in the face of change (such as climate change). The protection, restoration, enhancement and inter-linking of all semi-natural habitats in the landscape is a priority. This includes not only the wooded habitats but also the more open areas that provide the landscape context within which woodlands sit.

What next? - priorities for action

Retention, enhancement and restoration of the native woodland resource

Retaining native woodland with semi-natural characteristics is a vital. Without this basic resource, regardless of how it is managed, woodland species will decline. It is therefore important to prevent loss of native woodland, especially ancient woodland. PAWS restoration is the only way to increase the extent of ancient semi-natural woodland. The English National Forest Estate, managed by Forestry Commission England, is a key PAWS resource that requires a strategic and concerted approach to restoration, delivering the objectives of the government’s native woodland policy *Keepers in Time*⁶. Restoration of conifer PAWS should be achieved by restructuring

¹ See Defra Wild Bird Indicator:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/statistics/wildlife/research/download/wdbrds200603.pdf> & Repeat Woodland Bird Survey results: <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-6MWL96>

² Fox, R. *et al.* (2006) *The state of Britain’s larger moths*. Butterfly Conservation and Rothamsted Research, Wareham, Dorset and Fox, R. *et al.* *The state of Butterflies in Britain and Ireland*. Pisces Publications, Berkshire.

³ Yalden, D.W. 1992. Changing distribution and status of small mammals in Britain. *Mammal Review*, 22: 97-106

⁴ Kirby K J *et al.* (2005) *Long term ecological change in British Woodland (1971-2001)*. English Nature Research Report, No 653.

⁵ Kirby KJ & Drake, CM (Eds) 1993 *Dead wood matters: the ecology and conservation of saproxylic invertebrates in Britain* English Nature, Peterborough

⁶ Forestry Commission England (2005) *Keepers in Time – a statement of policy on England’s ancient and native woodland*. June 2005. Forestry Commission England, Cambridge.

and removal of the conifer crop at an ecologically appropriate scale and speed, to allow the regeneration of the semi-natural component.

Restoration of the biological condition of native woods includes existing woodlands, as well as those that are currently covered by conifer plantations. Existing semi-natural woodlands may be restored and enhanced through appropriate and targeted management.

Forestry also has a significant role to play in meeting UK BAP targets by restoring non-woodland habitats, such as semi-natural grassland, and lowland heathland on Forestry Commission England managed land. This inappropriate afforestation has had a direct adverse impact and continues to damage neighbouring non-woodland habitats through fragmentation, tree invasion and changes to soil conditions and drainage.

Appropriate management

Understanding the variation in objectives for woodland management is critical to biodiversity delivery. We acknowledge differing objectives of a multitude of public, voluntary sector and private woodland owners – the task of government is to ensure that biodiversity objectives, such as UK BAP, England Biodiversity Strategy, are a key part of the England Forestry Strategy⁷ and its delivery mechanisms, such as English Woodland Grant Scheme and agri-environment schemes.

Levels of management to deliver a dynamic, diverse and healthy woodland ecosystem will vary from intensive, sustainable woodland management (such as traditional coppicing where appropriate for biodiversity conservation) through to the restoration and encouragement of natural processes (such as minimal, or non-intervention). Targeted management is needed to support species and mosaics of woodland and non-woodland habitats. Mosaics of habitats should be restored, to support rare and threatened species and create dynamic, resilient woodland landscapes for the future.

We recognise the importance of economic activities, the development of markets and supply chains, as well as grant support, to drive ecologically beneficial woodland management. The development of such activities is key to bringing native woodland into management that will benefit priority species and habitats, and other public goods.

Different forms of management will be appropriate in different places, and important micro and mosaic habitats within woods (including streams, wetlands and rock faces) must receive special consideration. Management regimes should also encompass the conservation of evidence of the woodland's history as well as earlier archaeological sites which may also be present within the woodland.

Deadwood is one of the most threatened and fragmented components of woodland ecosystems in Europe, and is characterised by many relict populations of priority species. Improving forestry practice is key to retaining and enhancing the volume of deadwood in woodland so that when newer woodlands mature the species are able to recover.

Landscape context

⁷ Currently under review. Existing strategy: Forestry Commission (1998) *England Forestry Strategy - A New Focus for England's Woodlands*. Forestry Commission, Edinburgh.

The general context for forestry policy should be the improvement of the semi-natural habitat matrix across the wider countryside of which forests form a significant part. This should aim to provide the conditions and connectivity required - ecological coherence - for the species dependent on these habitats. Continued efforts to make agriculture more sympathetic to species movement are vital to improve the landscape context of native woodland.

Ecosystem Services

Our woods and forests are a multi-functional asset, appropriate treatment of which will deliver multiple benefits to people as well as protecting and enhancing biodiversity.

Woods play a key role in achieving a more sustainable landscape in both town and country. In so doing they contribute to the delivery of various ecosystem services. These range from the amelioration of erosion and flooding, sequestration of carbon in woodland soils, the substitution of unsustainable resources (such as oil) with sustainable ones (such as wood fuel) and the provision of public access for recreational purposes, thus contributing to the health agenda.

Link believes that the carbon sequestration benefits of woodland planting and management can play a limited role in a mitigation strategy. Carbon conscious land management should not mask the key challenge of direct reduction of emissions of greenhouse gas emissions. This requires action on reducing overall energy usage, development of energy efficiency programmes and product substitution. Carbon offsetting has little overall impact in emissions reductions but can help to engage the public and businesses to act in more carbon conscious ways, as long as offsetting focuses on residual emissions.

There should be a national objective of increasing environmentally sustainable access to woods, allied to regional and local targets, so that as many people as possible can enjoy the benefits they bring. Future stewardship of the resource also depends on inspiring the public with an enhanced appreciation and understanding of these benefits and maximising opportunities for the public to engage with trees and woods wherever possible.

Recognition of the importance of woodland cover of all types but particularly ancient woods, PAWS, woodlands supporting very localised UK BAP priority species and patterns of veteran trees to the quality of landscapes, and their cultural significance should also prevail through spatial planning policy.

Woodlands have the ability to produce a range of materials for human use (timber for example) in a way that benefits the woods themselves. Bioenergy is a recent example, which has the potential to deliver a wide range of public benefits if done sensitively. For instance this can be achieved through the restoration of planted ancient woods and re-invigorated management of existing woods. Creation of new woodland habitat, be it short rotation coppice or forestry, should be sited in appropriate places and contain tree species that are beneficial to woodland wildlife and do not compromise other environmental resources such as archaeological sites and the wider historic landscape.

Standards of woodland management

All woodland management funded by government and promoted by government policies, including woodfuel, energy coppice and agricultural support, must meet the UK Forestry Standard as an environmental minimum. We value the government's

continued commitment to its international sustainable forest management agreements through the application of the UK Forestry Standard⁸.

Link supports additional voluntary certification through the UK Woodland Assurance Standard⁹ (UKWAS), which meets international Forest Stewardship Council 'criteria and principles for sustainable forest management'. Link values the nature conservation and wood/timber traceability benefits that certification to the voluntary UKWAS offers. We feel that UKWAS certification has the potential to drive ecologically sound management, based upon ecological survey and management planning - we look forward to continued support for such work through the English Woodland Grant Scheme, and that Forestry Commission England continues to UKWAS certify the English state forest.

Information

It is important to understand the state of, and impacts on, England's native woodland resource. Research, survey and monitoring is needed to ensure that national and regional forestry policies, and those that impact woodlands, are properly informed. This will include information on the extent and condition of woodland, as well as afforested semi-natural habitats, and the permeability of neighbouring land. Knowledge of the history of the woodland and its continuity of management, from written sources and survey, as well as biological records will assist in understanding its management needs, and its landscape context.

Continued improvements in the knowledge about the habitat needs and dispersal abilities of key woodland species will enable enhanced management of the existing resource and much improved spatial targeting of woodland creation.

A copy of this background paper, and the associated one page manifesto document is available on the Link website: <http://www.wcl.org.uk/woodland.htm>

⁸ See: www.ukforestpartnership.org.uk; and 2004 UK Forestry Standard: <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-5YXMGD> & [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/PDF/fcfc001.pdf/\\$FILE/fcfc001.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/PDF/fcfc001.pdf/$FILE/fcfc001.pdf)

⁹ See: www.ukwas.org.uk