

Woodland Management briefing

July 2024

Introduction

Public support for English woodlands, and awareness of the environmental, health, social and economic benefits they provide, is higher than ever before.¹ Political parties and media outlets have responded to this renewed public appreciation by focusing on new woodland creation, with a new legal tree cover expansion target launched in England. Whilst promises to create new woodland are welcome, especially when actually delivered², the continuing focus on tree planting risks obscuring the need to better manage the woodland we already have, of which Ancient Woodlands are the best. It is vital that they are sufficiently protected and well managed to meet the criteria for achieving the target to protect 30% of land for nature by 2030.³ This briefing sets out the challenges facing England's woods and proposes policy recommendations that would improve their management, and the contribution they can make to achieving nature recovery targets.

The state of English woodland

In 2020 Forest Research published the first GB-wide survey of woodland ecological condition, which found that only 9% of native woodland in England could be considered in good ecological condition.⁴ Principle reasons for poor condition were fragmentation and low levels of older trees and veteran trees, the latter lacking from most woodlands. Low levels of deadwood and damage from herbivores were also key obstacles to achieving good condition. Invasive non-native plant, animal, bacteria and viruses are also contributors to the decline of woodland condition.

A top five driver of biodiversity decline, invasive non-native species (INNS) are an ongoing threat to important woodland habitats and to struggling native wildlife. Over 300 INNS are currently established in the UK⁵, many of which have significantly impacted the ecology and the landscape. Unsustainable expansion of deer populations are preventing young trees establishing inside and outside of woodland through natural regeneration, exacerbated by invasive populations including Reeves Muntjac, Fallow Deer, Sika Deer and Chinese Water Deer. A report by the Forestry Commission revealed that there are an estimated 98.7 thousand hectares of Rhododendron growing within and in close proximity to woodlands in Britain, which represents 3.3% of total woodland area.⁶ Rhododendron tends to favour the wetter west of the UK, with a particularly strong chokehold on temperate rainforest habitats where

¹ <https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2023/08/pofukeng-report-13jul23.pdf>

² <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/press-centre/2023/06/tree-planting-progress-near-glacial/>

³ https://wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/WCL_2023_Progress_Report_on_30x30_in_England_1.pdf

⁴ [NFI estimates of woodland ecological condition scores for England \(forestresearch.gov.uk\)](https://www.nfi.gov.uk/estimates-of-woodland-ecological-condition-scores-for-england)

⁵ <https://www.nonnativespecies.org/assets/NNSIP-Scorecard-2020.pdf>

⁶ https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2022/02/presence_of_rhododendron_in_british_woodlands.pdf

it is densely shading out native trees and key rainforest species, including internationally rare lichens and bryophytes.

The impacts of nitrogen air pollution on woodlands are widespread and directly affect many wild plants and fungi, with implications for wider ecosystem functioning, resilience and services. All woodlands in England exceed the critical load for nitrogen, causing significant harm to species and ecosystem integrity.^{7,8}

Degraded habitats mean trouble for the species who rely on them, especially woodland specialists. England woodland biodiversity indicators report that woodland birds have declined 39% since 1970.⁸ Declines have been greatest (51%) for ‘specialist’ species which are highly dependent on woodland habitats, but more recently since 2015 ‘generalist’ species using a wider range of habitats have also declined (12%). Butterflies of the wider countryside in woodland have declined 47% since 1990, without significant recent change since 2017.⁹ Hazel dormice, arboreal specialists reliant on woodlands with diverse species and age structure, have declined by 70% since 2000.¹⁰ Britain’s Western barbastelle bat populations have dropped by 99% over several hundred years, beginning about 500 years ago.¹¹ Flowering plant species distribution has dropped 64% since 1970, while bryophyte distribution has dropped 68% in that same time.¹²

It is striking that, despite an overall increase in the UK’s canopy cover throughout the 20th century, woodland wildlife species continue to decline. **Whilst important, woodland creation on its own will not save our woodland species, we also need to better manage the woodland that already exists and to connect existing and new woodland.**

Without improved and appropriate woodland management, the UK will struggle to achieve the critical nature recovery target included in the Environment Act 2021, to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030.¹³ Many of the indicator species for the target are woodland specialists, if they are not enabled to recover by better woodland management, the target will not be met.

What does good woodland management look like?

Link defines woodland management as: ***the development and delivery of a woodland management plan to deliver objectives, which might include, for example, timber production, public access, carbon capture, and crucially, should include improvement of woodland ecological condition and***

⁷ https://uk-air.defra.gov.uk/assets/documents/reports/cat09/2401111009_Air_Pollution_Trends_Report_2023.pdf

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/england-biodiversity-indicators/6-woodland-species>

⁹ For more on declines, see: <https://stateofnature.org.uk/>

¹⁰ <https://ptes.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/State-of-Britains-Dormice-2023.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.bats.org.uk/news/2023/12/bats-declined-as-britain-felled-trees-for-colonial-shipbuilding>

¹² <https://stateofnature.org.uk/countries/england/>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-legally-binding-environment-targets-set-out>

biodiversity conservation. Management can include minimal intervention where it best delivers set objectives. Indiscriminate felling in woodland cannot be considered as management.

Whilst it is widely considered that woodland management can benefit woodland biodiversity, it can involve an extremely wide range of activities with potential beneficial, damaging or negligible impacts on biodiversity. A presumption that all forms of woodland management are good for biodiversity is flawed as it is wholly dependent on the site specific context, species in question and intervention or non-intervention approach taken.

Link encourages woodland managers to prioritise biodiversity objectives to increase the contribution woodland makes to the achievement of the species abundance target in the Environment Act.

To reverse long-term woodland wildlife declines and increase woodland ecosystem resilience, the ecological condition of woodland must be improved. This requires appropriate proactive nature conservation management within woodland management planning, to provide a range of structures and conditions. For example, decaying wood and other old-growth characteristics, encouraging structural diversity appropriate to the habitat type, and allowing veteran features to develop on ageing trees such as trunk holes, cavities and fungal fruiting bodies. There is a need to support the development of natural processes through encouraging appropriate levels of ecological dynamism and disturbance in the resulting patterns of open habitats. Many butterflies require open and transitional spaces within woods, such as open rides and coppice. Woodland birds can depend on decaying wood and other old-growth characteristics for nesting or feeding. Hazel dormice, pine martens and bat species rely on features such as hollows, cracks and cavities. Woodland obligate bat species require the darker more cluttered understorey of largely undisturbed woodland.

Proactive intervention, such as various methods of thinning or coppice rotations is often needed, particularly where woodlands are small, isolated and in poor condition and it must factor in the needs of woodland biodiversity with consideration to protect as many species as possible. In addition, increased vigilance, planning and proactive management are essential to respond to the rapidly changing climate which is enabling established invasive non-native species to alter their geographical distribution to new areas in the UK, and introduce new harmful pests and diseases. The uncertainty of the impacts of climate change make building resilience and reducing the stresses on delicately balanced woodland ecosystems crucial to give them the best chance of survival.

Sympathetic intervention is, however, only part of good management and must be combined with addressing other key threats and drivers of biodiversity decline such as preventing importation of new tree diseases, reducing pollution pressures such as ammonia, and restoration of other habitats used by woodland species. Management of browsing pressure is also critical. Deer are an important part of English woodland but numbers are now likely higher than anytime in the last 1000 years. Deer browsing has a substantial impact on woodland vegetation and the understorey and is a major threat

to the health and resilience of our woodlands. Reducing and sustainably managing the impacts of deer browsing is essential for woodlands to flourish for biodiversity.

We welcome the Government's aspiration to improve woodland management for nature. Targets have been set in Defra's Keepers of Time Policy (2022) to improve the condition of the majority of native woodland and bring the majority of plantations on ancient woodland sites into restoration by 2030. The policies we recommend below would grow good woodland management practice and help achieve the Keepers of Time targets, in turn helping to achieve the species abundance target in the Environment Act.

Policy recommendation 1: (i) Change the Forestry Commission definition of sustainable woodland management and (ii) review felling licensing

The Forestry Commission's key performance indicators define sustainable woodland management as *"woodland managed to the UK Forestry Standard that has a Woodland Management Plan, or for which we have provided a grant or felling licence in the last 15 years. It also includes all woodland in the nation's forests managed by Forestry England and all woodland on Defence Infrastructure Organisation training areas."*¹⁴

This definition is not sufficient to ensure delivery of management which is beneficial to biodiversity. As such Link does not support its use as a measure of progress towards Government's sustainable woodland management aims.

The felling license provisions in the definition provide a loophole whereby actions which are legal, but actually harmful to nature can fall under the sustainable woodland management definition. Currently, the Government cannot place conditions when granting felling licences to ensure felling activity is delivered in line with nature's needs. Under current conditions an ancient woodland replanted with damaging conifers would currently count towards Forestry Commission's sustainable management target.

The definition's reliance on the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS) is also a problem. There is a lack of publicly available monitoring to demonstrate on the ground compliance with the UKFS and some of the key sustainability requirements in the UKFS only require the woodland owner to "consider" the sustainable action for wildlife, rather than adopt them where possible.

Link recommends that the Government's sustainable woodland management definition be replaced with one that defines 'conservation woodland management', and accurately describes practices and monitoring needed to meet biodiversity objectives in woodland management.

¹⁴ [Forestry-Commission-Key-Performance-Indicators-Report-2022-23.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

Link defines woodland management as: *the development and delivery of a woodland management plan to deliver objectives, which might include, for example, timber production, public access, carbon capture, and crucially, should include improvement of woodland ecological condition and biodiversity conservation. Management can include minimal intervention where it best delivers set objectives. Indiscriminate felling in woodland cannot be considered as management.*

Link also recommends that a review of felling takes place to examine how effective the felling licensing regime is for delivering sustainability standards in woodlands managed outside grant schemes.

Policy recommendation 2: Government to support making more advice available on reconciling commercial and nature objectives in woodland management

There are a wide variety of woodland types and objectives in England and no single management approach is suitable or appropriate for all. This includes the production of timber, which is important for rural jobs, provision of wood products (e.g. building materials) and potential climate change mitigation where carbon intensive materials such as concrete are substituted.

Whilst native woodland habitats are generally considered best for wildlife, commercial plantations of mostly non-native tree species can also deliver positive benefits for wildlife when managed to create a variety of habitat structures, such as ponds, open space, deadwood, native shrubs/trees and veteran trees. This is often at an economic cost to the owner in terms of the level of land dedicated to pure production, but there is increasing evidence that high biodiversity and good woodland ecological condition in all woodland types is fundamental to their resilience and therefore long-term productivity.¹⁵

The economic benefits of managing woodland better for nature, even in purely commercial plantations, need to be more effectively communicated to woodland managers.

Link recommends the Government should support more face-to-face advice and training to give foresters, farmers and other land managers confidence to manage woodland effectively for biodiversity. The Woodland Wildlife Toolkit¹⁶ marks an excellent start towards that and should continue to be rolled out more widely. We also support the Government's greater use of woodland condition assessments through grant schemes.

Policy recommendation 3: Grant full legal protection to Ancient Woodland and strengthen the Keepers of Time policy with funded delivery plans.

¹⁵ https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2021/01/20_0042_leaflet_cc_factsheet_biodiversity_wip07_acc.pdf

¹⁶ <https://woodlandwildlifetoolkit.sylva.org.uk/>

The delivery plan should include a commitment to give ancient woodland full legal protection. Currently ancient woodland only has planning system protections in the National Planning Policy Framework. These protections lack statutory weight, so can sometimes be overridden leading to damage or loss of ancient woodland. Full legal protection would address this.¹⁷

Defra's Keepers of Time policy document sets out welcome aspirations to improve woodland management for nature within ancient woodland.¹⁸ Two years on from the document's publication however, progress has been sorely lacking with only one hectare of plantation on ancient woodland in private hands reported as being supported by Government into restoration in 2022/23.¹⁴

Defra, Forestry Commission England and Forestry England should commit to creating a costed, time bound delivery plan to fulfil their commitment to restore the plantation on ancient woodland sites within public and private ownerships.

The delivery plan should also include dedicated targets to improve condition and ensure designated woods are given sufficient grant funding and regulation oversight needed to get more into favourable condition. Funding should also be allocated, to enable better monitoring of ancient woodlands and their condition, and to unlock more restoration projects.¹⁹

Policy Recommendation 4: Greater support from Government to increase the uptake of the accredited UKWAS standard and the use of certified timber and timber products.

The UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) is a voluntary independent certification standard for sustainable woodland management in the UK with verification through independent, third-party auditing. UKWAS is used for both the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) certification schemes. Certification has an important role in demonstrating sustainable forest management and provides additional assurances for the maintenance or enhancement of biodiversity including ancient woodland and veteran tree management.

Approximately 43% of woodland in the UK is UKWAS certified but rates of uptake are the lowest in England at only 24% of all woodlands.²⁰ The majority of existing certified English woodlands are on the public forest estate (Forestry England) and charity owned land.

¹⁷ See Woodland Trust campaign:

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/protecting-trees-and-woods/campaign-with-us/tree-protection-campaign/>

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keepers-of-time-ancient-and-native-woodland-and-trees-policy-in-england/keepers-of-time-ancient-and-native-woodland-and-trees-policy-in-england>

¹⁹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0301479722007940>

²⁰ https://cdn.forestresearch.gov.uk/2023/09/Ch1_Woodland.pdf

Due to the wide ranging and sustainable benefit that UKWAS brings there is a desire to see more English woodlands certified to this standard. Further measures and incentives are needed both to increase the demand for certified timber and timber products but also to support and encourage private owners and estates, especially those with native woodlands to become certified. For example, the FSC Ecosystem Services Procedure, which has been successfully implemented in FSC certified forests around the globe, is attractive to forest managers for both the financial and non-monetary benefits, as the benefits to woodland biodiversity and other ecosystem services are verified.

Additional suggested measures could include but are not limited to:

- Greater recognition of UKWAS certification when it comes to grant and felling licence applications in terms of reduced applications and administrative/reporting process.
- Recognition and promotion of FSC ecosystem services verification as a gateway for funding streams aimed at promoting woodland based ecosystem services provision
- Increasing the number of woodland assets held by government and government agencies that are included within UKWAS certification

Link recommends that UKWAS certification should be further recognised and supported by Government with measures to increase its uptake in both commercial and wider woodlands, including small estate woodlands where entry to this scheme is more challenging.

Policy Recommendation 5: Government must prioritise the management of Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) and air pollution as part of improving woodland condition.

We need to understand at what point, and over what timescales, deer and INNS impacts adversely affect aspects of woodland condition. It is critical that governments continue to support regular monitoring such as via the NFI, to understand change over time and the most effective responses. Government should focus on landscape-scale management rather than site level actions which are not enough to combat the problem at scale.

An effective long-term rhododendron eradication strategy is needed, informed by accurate density mapping on priority woodland habitats. If this is in place, then public grants can be proactively targeted in a planned, strategic, and much more cost-effective manner.

Government action to considerably reduce nitrogen and carbon emissions from existing sources is essential, which will likely require significant changes to existing land use practices. In the interim, reduction attempts can be combined with habitat buffering and capturing emissions to reduce their dispersal into woodland ecosystems, particularly ancient woodlands. The UK's rainforest on the west coast should be a priority as they are one of the last remaining strongholds for many nitrogen-intolerant woodland lichens which otherwise would be more widespread in other parts of the UK.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 83 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world.

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The following organisations have inputted into this briefing and support improved woodland management:

