

# keepers of time

A STATEMENT OF POLICY FOR ENGLAND'S  
ANCIENT & NATIVE WOODLAND



Our ancient woodlands are quintessential features of England's much-loved landscapes — irreplaceable, living historic monuments which inspire us and provide us with a sense of place and history in an increasingly frenetic world.

## foreword

England's diverse and beautiful landscapes are justly famous the world over — from the dramatic summits of the Lake District to the gently rolling countryside of the Garden of England. Our ancient woodlands are quintessential features of these much loved landscapes — irreplaceable, living historic monuments which inspire us and provide us with a sense of place and history in an increasingly frenetic world.

Ancient woodlands are a tangible expression of the principles of sustainability, used by people for many generations to produce essential yet sustainable everyday materials. At the same time, these woods have provided homes for much of England's wildlife. Although this sustainable use continues today in many of our woodlands, others have declined in value, and some have been lost forever. Addressing loss and decline by tackling the threats to our ancient and native woodlands is essential if these cherished places are to continue enriching our lives.

The Government's vision is that **"Ancient woodlands, veteran trees and other native woodlands are adequately protected, sustainably managed in a wider landscape context, and are providing a wide range of social, environmental and economic benefits to society."** This is an ambitious vision but one which we believe is realistically achievable by 2020. Forestry Commission England will work in close alignment with Natural England Partners to ensure effective and coherent delivery of the policy, including a simplified system of support for landowners and positive partnerships with a range of other organisations. It is also

vital that we work closely with the many private owners of these woodlands, and we are particularly keen to engage with those who currently may not be aware of the value and vulnerability of the resource they own.

This policy statement explains several new approaches that we will be taking. Firstly, we will be addressing threats and decline as the first priority. Secondly, implementing management 'with a light touch' so that we work with nature as far as possible. Thirdly, taking a 'whole landscape' perspective; or put another way, quite literally taking a bird's eye view of woodland.

As well as containing key policy principles, this statement sets out a series of strategic objectives which will act as a framework for action over the coming years. We will also develop a series of initiatives and programmes of activity to deliver the vision. Finally, we include a comprehensive range of outcomes which we will use as quantitative measures by which we can monitor progress and judge success.

This Policy Statement rightly celebrates the importance of our native and ancient woodlands and set outs a sound basis on which to achieve the vision. We can all look forward to seeing the vision becoming reality over the coming years.



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Landscape and Biodiversity)

Veteran tree



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the value  
of ancient  
woodland  
and trees

England's ancient woodlands and trees represent a living cultural heritage, a natural equivalent to our great churches and castles. They are also our richest wildlife habitat and are highly valued by people as places of tranquillity and inspiration.

This statement updates the government's policy towards woodlands and trees by re-emphasising their value, evaluating threats and opportunities and setting out a range of actions to improve their protection and quality.

Perhaps more than any other land use in the English countryside, well managed ancient and native woodlands are exemplars of sustainability. They are places shaped by people, having been actively worked for centuries to provide a diverse range of products and fuel for people's daily lives. Simultaneously, they have provided homes for a significant proportion of England's wildlife and are increasingly used for recreation, sport and education. This potential for compatible multiple use continues to the present day.



**Ancient woodlands and trees are particularly important because they:**

- Are exceptionally rich in wildlife, including many rare species and habitats
- Provide a quality renewable resource in the form of hardwood timber and other woodland products
- Contain surviving descendants and features from the original natural forests
- Act as reservoirs from which wildlife can spread into new woodlands
- Are an integral part of England's historic landscapes
- Contain a wealth of historic features unaltered by cultivation or disturbance
- Contribute to people's sense of place and imagination



# nature and extent

In the few centuries following the last ice age, most of England developed into woodland — the so called **wildwood**. The fragments of this once extensive woodland which still survive are our **ancient woodlands**<sup>1</sup>, but they now cover only around 3% of England’s land area. In the 20th century, many have been lost to agriculture and development or damaged through conversion to plantations of exotic conifer species. Such **plantations on ancient woodland sites** (PAWS) may look very unlike ‘native’ woodland but in fact many valuable wildlife and cultural features often survive or lie dormant within them.

<sup>1</sup>The definition of ancient woodland used here is ‘woodland which has been in continuous existence since at least 1600AD’.

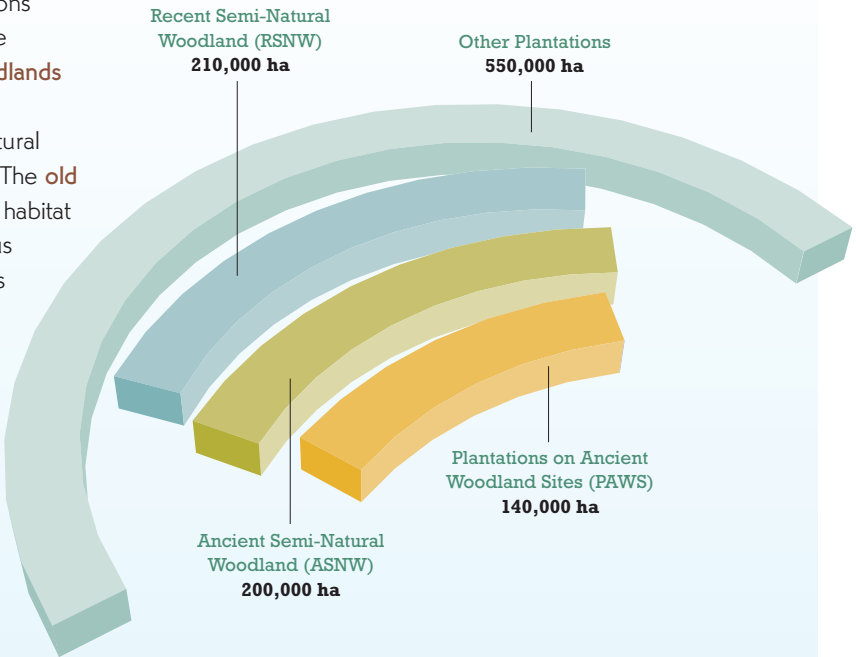
**Figure 1.** Some examples of important ecological components found in ancient woodlands

Those ancient woodlands not converted to conifer plantations and still containing mostly native tree species are said to be semi-natural in character. These **ancient semi-natural woodlands** are generally our most valuable sites and may contain fine examples of **ancient or veteran trees** (very old trees of cultural and/or biological interest) and rare or threatened species. The **old growth** associated with ancient trees is a hugely important habitat in it’s own right, particularly where this has been continuous over many centuries, as it supports a wide range of species rarely found elsewhere. Many of our best old growth habitats are found in historic parklands and wood pastures which are also important cultural and landscape features.

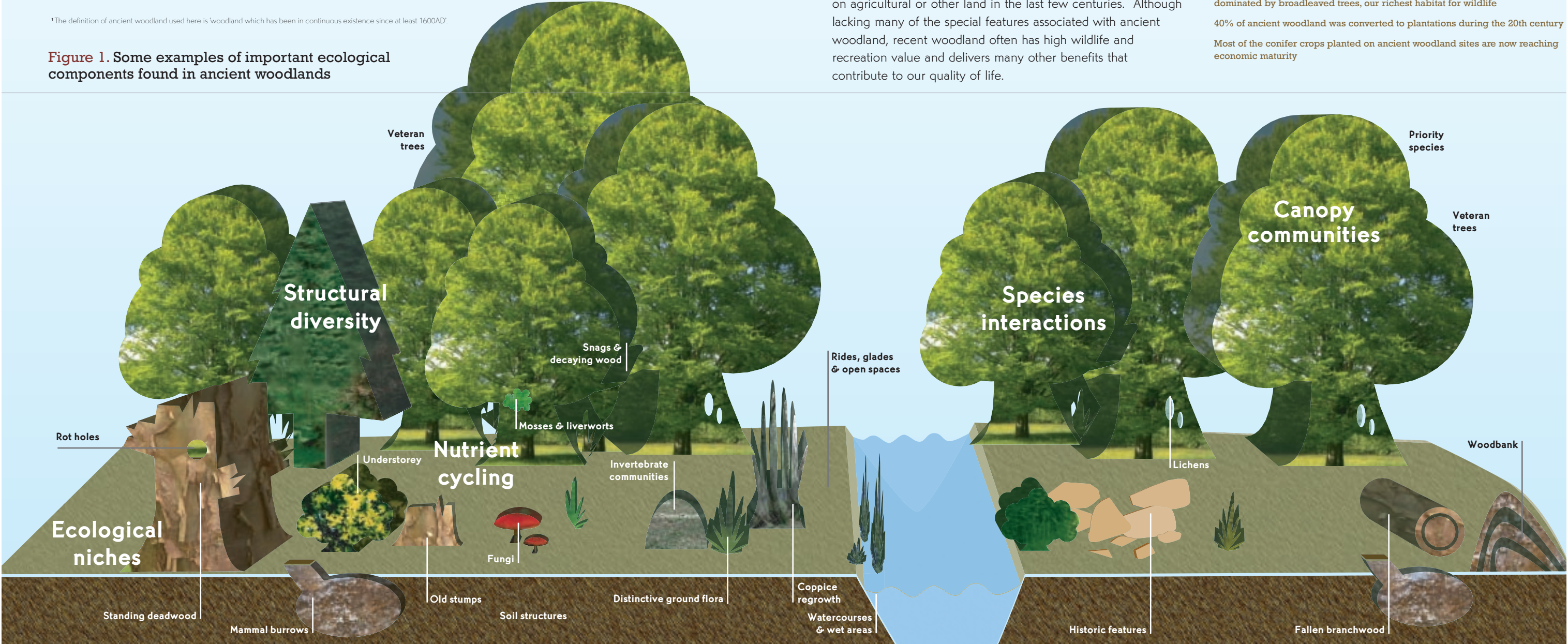
Many species of wildlife found in ancient woodland are very poor at colonising recent woodland and only survive due to the long continuity of woodland cover and undisturbed soil profiles. This means ancient woodland is irreplaceable, reinforcing the need to protect and encourage the recovery of the surviving remnant features.

**Recent native woodland** is woodland that has been established on agricultural or other land in the last few centuries. Although lacking many of the special features associated with ancient woodland, recent woodland often has high wildlife and recreation value and delivers many other benefits that contribute to our quality of life.

Total area of woodland in England 1.1 m ha



**Areas of ancient woodland**  
 Approximately 50% of England’s total woodland resource is either ancient or dominated by broadleaved trees, our richest habitat for wildlife  
 40% of ancient woodland was converted to plantations during the 20th century  
 Most of the conifer crops planted on ancient woodland sites are now reaching economic maturity







# policy and strategic objectives

**As an expression of our commitment to ancient and native woodland we have adopted the following '2020 Vision':**

“Ancient woodlands, veteran trees and other native woodlands are adequately protected, sustainably managed in a wider landscape context, and are providing a wide range of social, environmental and economic benefits to society.”

*Delivering this vision by 2020 will require wide ranging action. The policies and strategic objectives the Government will pursue are stated overleaf.*





# policy

The existing area of ancient woodland should be maintained and there should be a net increase in the area of native woodland

Ancient and native woodland and trees should make an increasing contribution to our quality of life

Ancient and native woodland should be exemplars of sustainable development, and provide opportunities for enterprise and employment

The ecological condition of ancient and native woodland should be improved and maintained

Rare, threatened or Priority species associated with ancient and native woodland should be conserved and enhanced

The cultural heritage associated with ancient woodland and veteran trees should be protected and conserved

The landscape context of woodland should be improved

# strategic objectives

- ◆ Take steps to avoid losses of ancient woodland and of ancient and veteran trees
- ◆ Sustain the total extent of other native woodland (ensuring that gains exceed any losses)

- ◆ Increase opportunities for the public to visit and walk in ancient and native woodland
- ◆ Improve the quality of recreational experience in those woods which are open to public access
- ◆ Improve understanding and enjoyment of trees and woodland, especially their heritage and wildlife value
- ◆ Enhance the contribution of native woodland and ancient trees to urban environments and rural landscape

- ◆ Increase the recognition and use of 'environmental services' which native woodland can provide (e.g. flood alleviation and pollution mitigation)
- ◆ Promote the production of renewable energy, hardwood timber and other products from existing woodland
- ◆ Foster enterprises and employment associated with ancient and native woodland

- ◆ Increase our knowledge of both woodland condition and threats, particularly climate change
- ◆ Address all major threats and widespread reasons for decline
- ◆ Take action to manage invasive and problem species
- ◆ Increase awareness amongst owners of the value of their woodland, and any threats present
- ◆ Support work on the ground to improve condition, particularly of designated sites, and to restore plantations on ancient woodland sites
- ◆ Monitor changes in response to management
- ◆ Monitor changes in plant abundance and diversity and research the underlying causes

- ◆ Increase our understanding of the needs of Priority species (including rare, threatened or 'listed' species)
- ◆ Provide guidance on good practice management for Priority species
- ◆ Support work on the ground to increase populations and/or ranges of Priority species

- ◆ Improve our knowledge and awareness of woodland heritage
- ◆ Promote good working practices to ensure valuable features are identified and conserved
- ◆ Ensure that any woodland creation is in keeping with the distinctive local landscape and its history
- ◆ Provide opportunities for public appreciation of woodland history

- ◆ Create new native woodland to extend, link or complement existing woodland and other habitats
- ◆ Create semi-natural habitats in locations where they will benefit species which use both woodland and non-woodland habitats
- ◆ Reduce or buffer the impacts of intensive land uses and development which adjoin ancient or native woodland
- ◆ Work towards creating landscapes that are 'ecologically functional'
- ◆ Ensure the management and creation of ancient and/or native woodland conserves and enhances the natural beauty and character of landscapes

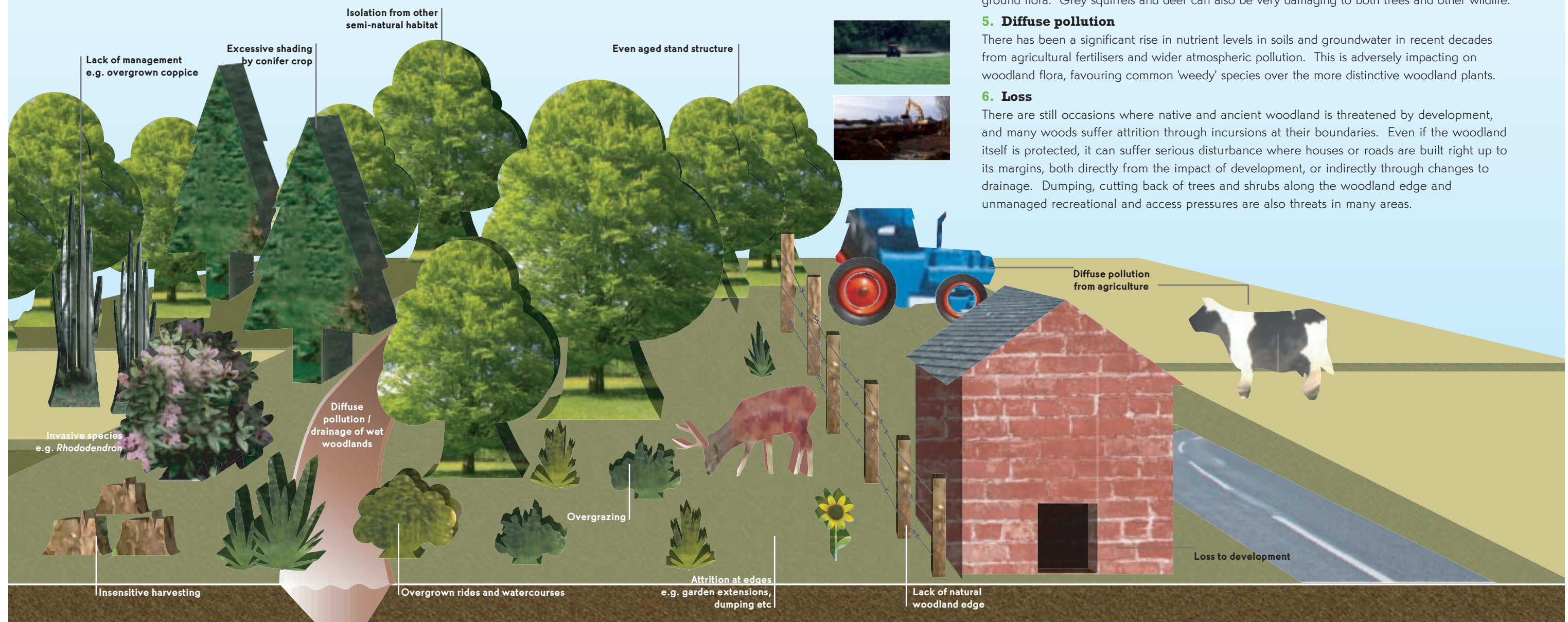


# threats

Although our ancient and native woods are immensely rich habitats, and many are highly valued by their owners and users, there are many others that are declining, threatened, or simply not realising their potential due to lack of basic management.

Threats to our ancient and native woodlands can be immediate and absolute (e.g. loss to infrastructure or development) or slower and more subtle (e.g. shading from conifer plantations or invasive species such as *Rhododendron*). There are also more widespread environmental changes, such as diffuse pollution and climate change, which may threaten woodland in the long term (see figure 2). Tackling threats will require a strategic approach which means addressing the most severe and widespread threats first.

Figure 2. Threats to ancient woodlands



## Major threats to ancient and native woodland

### 1. Climate change & fragmentation

Many native woodlands are very small and have become increasingly isolated from other semi-natural habitats. The intensification of agriculture over recent decades has exacerbated the effects of isolation. Many woodland species are poor dispersers and will be severely threatened as their 'climate space' moves and changes.

### 2. Excessive browsing and grazing by deer & livestock

Unsustainably high populations of wild deer prevent natural regeneration and impoverish woodland ground flora. Similarly, intensive grazing by livestock, especially sheep in the uplands, can result in loss of key features and threaten the long-term viability of woods. Conversely, sustainable levels of browsing and grazing by deer are important in maintaining woodland biodiversity.

### 3. Inadequate or inappropriate management

Traditional practices such as coppicing ceased in most woods many decades ago and recent decreases in timber prices could lead to more woodlands falling into neglect. This will lead to a further depletion of wildlife communities, particularly those which depend on the open woodland conditions created by active management. Conversely, insensitive management operations can cause serious damage to woodland wildlife, soils and surviving heritage features.

### 4. Invasive and problem species

In both ancient and native woodlands, invasive and problem species can have profoundly detrimental effects on both biodiversity and cultural heritage features. Planted conifers and *Rhododendron* are the most widespread and densely-shading plants which can all but eradicate ground flora. Grey squirrels and deer can also be very damaging to both trees and other wildlife.

### 5. Diffuse pollution

There has been a significant rise in nutrient levels in soils and groundwater in recent decades from agricultural fertilisers and wider atmospheric pollution. This is adversely impacting on woodland flora, favouring common 'weedy' species over the more distinctive woodland plants.

### 6. Loss

There are still occasions where native and ancient woodland is threatened by development, and many woods suffer attrition through incursions at their boundaries. Even if the woodland itself is protected, it can suffer serious disturbance where houses or roads are built right up to its margins, both directly from the impact of development, or indirectly through changes to drainage. Dumping, cutting back of trees and shrubs along the woodland edge and unmanaged recreational and access pressures are also threats in many areas.



# opportunities and priorities



Black hairstreak:  
a scarce butterfly of open  
woodlands with blackthorn thickets

The **opportunities** for improving ancient and native woodlands for both people and wildlife are manifold. Much of the 140,000 ha of plantations on ancient woodland sites (PAWS) is currently in urgent need of management if we are to prevent any further loss of the surviving wildlife and historic features. Many of these plantations could, through careful and gradual improvement, be restored to rich, ancient semi-natural woodlands. Most woods do not need intensive management, and often it is only a 'light touch' that is required to remove or reduce a cause of decline or gradually improve their ecological quality. To **safeguard their value** for future generations we need to **prevent further loss**, **improve condition** and **restore** severely degraded sites.

Ancient and native woodlands have produced renewable products such as fuel and timber for generations and have enormous potential to continue to do so. When managed in a sustainable way, quality hardwood **timber production** can be perfectly compatible with wildlife conservation and recreational activities.

The **opportunities for the public** to enjoy these woodlands is sometimes limited. There is therefore scope for working in partnership with owners to increase the area of our woodland which is accessible for quiet recreation, particularly in those areas where there is limited access to woodland.

The key priority of this policy is the protection and enhancement of the existing ancient and native woodland resource. This can be achieved by focussing activity both

*within* and *without* woodlands. For example by taking opportunities for creating strategically located **new native woodlands** or reducing the general intensity of surrounding land use. New woodlands are particularly valuable where they buffer, extend or even link England's highly fragmented wooded landscapes. By seeing woodlands as an integral part of the wider landscape, we will create opportunities to develop **networks** of woodland and other semi-natural habitats into **ecologically functional landscapes**. Taking this 'system approach' will increase the resilience of wildlife to external threats, particularly climate change and diffuse pollution. The habitat networks which could be created will not only benefit wildlife, but could also make landscapes more accessible to people and provide 'green transport routes' — particularly where they interface with urban areas.

Mountain biking: the fun factor



## Wider policy context

The **England Forestry Strategy** sets out how Government will prioritise and deliver forestry policies in England. This statement ensures ancient and native woodland will continue to contribute fully to the four strategic priorities in the strategy — rural development, economic regeneration, recreation access and tourism, environment and conservation. However, it is clear Government has a wider range of policy objectives which ancient and native woodland can help deliver, some of which are listed below:

The **UK Sustainable Development Strategy** sets out how Government is pursuing the principles of sustainability. Woodlands can be an ideal expression of these, producing renewable materials and fuels, with minimal environmental impacts, whilst enhancing the quality of life of local communities. The Government has identified 15 Headline Indicators for this strategy, one of which is changes in the populations of wild birds. A sizeable proportion of these are woodland birds, and enhancing the native woodland habitat and its landscape context should contribute to the reversal of the long term downward trend in bird numbers.

The three priorities for rural policy in Government's **Rural Strategy 2004** are: economic and social regeneration; social justice for all and; enhancing the value of our countryside. Well managed and accessible ancient and native woodlands will contribute towards all three of these priorities.

Ten years after the seminal 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Government re-affirmed its commitment to the **Convention on Biological Diversity** by signing the **Global Biodiversity Challenge** in Johannesburg. A target was subsequently agreed for Europe, at Gottenburg, 'to reverse the loss of biodiversity by 2010'. To achieve this goal we need to address all major causes of loss of woodland biodiversity and target new native woodland to help counter the loss of biodiversity in the wider countryside.

This reinforces the aims and actions of the **UK Biodiversity Action Plan**, and in particular the Habitat Action Plans for native woodland.

The **Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act (2000)** places a responsibility on Government to take reasonably practicable steps to further the conservation of priority habitats and species. These include the 6 Habitat Action Plan types for native woodland which occur in England and at least 67 associated Species Action Plans. 'Conservation' is explicitly defined in the Act as including both restoration and enhancement of the habitat or population.

The **England Biodiversity Strategy** was published in 2002 and is a means by which the Government will fulfil obligations under the CROW Act. One of the five main sectors is Woodland and Forestry, and there is a challenging Work Programme for the 5-year life of the strategy. The Government has also published a set of indicators for the strategy, and progress with protecting, enhancing and restoring native woodland is one of the headline indicators. The condition of the 115,000 ha of woodland SSSIs is another headline indicator, and Government has a Public Service Agreement target to achieve 95% of SSSIs in either 'favourable' or 'recovering' condition by 2010.

This policy statement will also help support a range of social and quality of life commitments as outlined in '**Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future**'. Here, new native woodland may feature within wider "green infrastructure" frameworks focussed on improving the environments where people live. In addition it will support the greenbelt where, for example, local authorities are encouraged to improve their accessibility, biodiversity and amenity value.



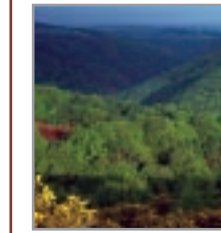
The Government has recognised the importance of ancient woodland since the introduction of the Broadleaves Policy of 1985. However, we believe that we must now significantly raise the profile and importance of ancient woodland by placing it right at the heart of our policies on woodlands and forestry. Our ancient and semi-natural woodlands are the jewels in the crown of English forestry, and protecting and enhancing them will be a high priority.

## new approaches

We are also aware that since the 1980s our understanding of woodlands has increased, new issues have arisen and many of the pressures on the resource have changed. The successful implementation of this policy will depend on developing new approaches to the use, promotion and management of the ancient and native woodland resource. In broad principle terms, we need to:

- ◆ Take action at the landscape scale (see right)
- ◆ Ensure the resource continues to provide a range of economic benefits to owners and valuable environmental services to society at large, whilst also safeguarding wildlife and cultural heritage values
- ◆ Develop more effective partnership working with a larger proportion of owners and stakeholders with the aim of bringing the resource into favourable condition
- ◆ Prioritise action so that we address the most serious and widespread threats first
- ◆ Focus attention on improving and restoring ancient woodland sites which are in poor ecological condition or have been converted to plantations
- ◆ Ensure that we apply appropriate levels of management to safeguard value – which may often just be a light touch
- ◆ Work better with nature and redress imbalances in woodland ecosystems – for example, addressing the problem of unsustainably high populations of wild deer

### Management at a landscape scale



**1.** Woodlands have traditionally been managed in isolation from other habitats in the landscape. Much of our wildlife sees and uses the landscape as a whole and there is growing recognition in the face of climate change that we need to re-connect the semi-natural components of our landscapes into ecologically functional units. Woodlands and trees will be among the most important features of such habitat networks.



**2.** Woodland creation should focus on increasing the area of semi-natural habitats available to wildlife and reducing the negative edge effects of intensive adjacent land use. Woodland margins typically have the greatest species diversity and are also invaluable for many non-woodland species, particularly where they border other semi-natural habitats.



**3.** There is a need to re-establish graded, more natural transitions and buffers between woodland perimeters and surrounding land uses, comprising shrubs, scrub, hedgerows and marginal trees with deep crowns.



**4.** Many of the key threats to woodland wildlife such as climate change, diffuse pollution, poor water quality, deer and invasive plants operate at a landscape scale. This means we have to tackle them at this scale.



**5.** Woodlands should be part of accessible landscapes. People who visit or walk in woods often restrict their visit to one discrete site. If woods are to fulfil their potential as sustainable transport routes, and provide opportunities for healthy exercise, we need to develop access *between* woodlands and other semi-natural habitats throughout whole landscapes.

Bluebells: a famous ancient woodland spectacle



Coppice management:  
producing products  
and enhancing wildlife

## measuring success

This policy is designed to deliver tangible change in the way woodlands and wooded landscapes are used and perceived. Some of the outcomes we aim to achieve by 2020 are listed right. Many of these are established measures, and have, for example, been included as indicators for the England Biodiversity Strategy. Although most are based on existing datasets, there are a few where new data sources will need to be established. We will use these measures to monitor progress and assess the success of the policy. We will also look to set quantitative targets for most of these key outcomes in order to drive delivery of the policy.

### Policy area

### Outcome

#### Protection of the resource

- ◆ Existing area of ancient woodland maintained
- ◆ Net increase in area of other native woodland
- ◆ No significant or unnecessary losses of known veteran trees

#### Quality of life

- ◆ Increase in the number of people visiting woodlands for leisure purposes
- ◆ Increase in the proportion of the population with access to woodland near to where they live

#### Enterprise and employment

- ◆ Increase in the number of enterprises and/or jobs directly or indirectly associated with ancient or native woodland

#### Ecological condition

- ◆ All widespread and serious threats to ancient and native woodland being reduced
- ◆ The majority of ancient semi-natural woodland either in favourable condition or being improved
- ◆ The majority of planted ancient woodland sites either being improved or under gradual restoration to native woodland
- ◆ 95% of woodland SSSIs in favourable or recovering condition (by 2010)

#### Woodland species

- ◆ Reversal of the long-term decline in the numbers of woodland birds
- ◆ Enhanced habitat quality and plant diversity in broadleaved woodlands
- ◆ Improvement in the status of woodland Priority species (i.e. the 67 species with action plans in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan)

#### Cultural heritage

- ◆ Local communities increasingly aware of the heritage and environmental value of ancient and native woodland
- ◆ An increase in the area of broadleaved woodland in landscape character areas where this is recognised as a positive change

#### Landscape context

- ◆ The visual and ecological landscape context of the majority of ancient woodland improved



# translating policy into action

This policy is a framework under which specific initiatives, projects and delivery measures will be developed.

An Action Plan will accompany this document which will build on the many positive initiatives already underway.

The Forestry Commission will act as the lead body, but it will also involve action from many other sectors of Government, statutory agencies and non-governmental organisations. Most importantly, it will require positive partnerships between the Forestry Commission and private and other woodland owners.

The Government owns and manages a significant proportion of the ancient and native woodland resource. Most of this is managed by Forest Enterprise, who will be aiming to deliver this policy energetically and innovatively through a range of actions on the estate.

Wood ants:  
a 'keystone' insect species



Light and shade: gaps in the canopy are valuable features in native woodlands





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