

BIODIVERSITY WORKING GROUP PROGRESS REPORT

Introduction

1. This paper is a snapshot of the stage that the Forum's Biodiversity Working Group's ongoing discussions have reached. The paper reviews briefly the role of the group, the approach followed and topics identified. The paper identifies emerging key issues and proposes a range of potential actions in relation to each of these topics. The paper is intended to enable the Forum to add to these discussions. In the light of feedback from the Forum the Working Group will meet again to finalise its report and recommendations for the next Forum meeting.

Remit and Membership

2. There are many aspects of forestry that relate to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP). Those associated with native woodland, and particularly the UK Native Woodland Habitat Action Plans (HAPs) are addressed through the England Native Woodland Partnership (and reported in Forum Paper 10/02).
3. The remit of the England Forestry Forum (EFF) Biodiversity Working Group is to develop proposals which help to progress recognition of the role of forestry in delivering other elements of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, and to provide guidance on best practice relating to forestry which could affect habitats beyond those addressed through the UK Native Woodland Habitat Action Plan.
4. Members of the Working Group include:

Ed Mills, Institute of Chartered Foresters
Humphrey Temperley, LGA
Joan Dixon, Small Woods Association
Emma Goldberg, English Nature
Richard Smithers, Woodland Trust
Henry Aubrey-Fletcher, Country Land & Business Association (to June 2002)
Judith Webb, Country Land & Business Association (from June 2002)
Richard Smith, Forestry & Timber Association
John Waldon, RSPB (Working Group Leader until July 2002)
Mike Clarke, RSPB (Working Group Leader from July 2002)
5. The Group was established following the England Forestry Forum meeting of October 2001, and met in February and April 2002. A number of key topics have been identified, which are being progressed.



Approach Followed

6. Forestry policy has wider implications for UK BAP delivery beyond the UK Native Woodland HAPs. These include:
 - Conservation of species linked with forest types not covered by the UK Native Woodland HAPs
 - Management of UK BAP priority open-ground habitats and species that occur within forests
 - Protection of priority open-ground habitats and species from inappropriate afforestation
 - Restoration of priority open-ground habitats (e.g. heathland and peatland) through forest restructuring or removal
 - Potential for afforestation on arable or improved grassland to buffer priority open-ground habitats from more intensive land use and help create ecologically functional landscapes.
7. The Group has focused attention on the following key topics:
 - Short rotation coppice (wood fuel from existing woods has not been considered)
 - Restoration of priority open-ground habitats
 - Biodiversity of non-native woodland (excluding Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites - PAWS)
 - Role of woodland within floodplains
 - Landscape-scale conservation.

SHORT ROTATION COPPICE

Background

8. The development of biofuels for renewable energy is potentially an important driver of future land-use change. This paper does not address wood-fuel from existing woodlands, either as material from management operations in existing woodlands or the co-products from initial processing, since the biodiversity impacts of woodland management should be addressed through existing mechanisms and best practice standards.
9. Short Rotation Coppice (SRC) may provide the most appropriate source of bioenergy to meet the UK's renewable energy needs in the short term. Currently bioenergy crops (including perennial grasses, such as *Miscanthus spp.*) have to compete for land with other agricultural products and under the present economic climate they are less profitable. To supply 1 per cent of UK electricity from energy crops would require about 160,000 hectares: the total area of energy crops planted in England, so far, is 1,500 hectares (predominately SRC).
10. However, the potential for trading in carbon credits and decoupling of agricultural subsidies, proposed under the mid-term CAP review, could make bioenergy more economically attractive.



11. Evidence suggests that converting arable land to SRC can reduce the amount of chemical usage, once established, and deliver positive biodiversity benefits. However, the initial establishment phase of SRC is not particularly beneficial to biodiversity since it requires relatively intensive weed control and inputs of chemicals to control potential pest species.
12. The most important issue for biodiversity is the location of new planting and the habitat it replaces. If SRC is planted on arable or improved grassland adjacent to semi-natural habitats it may have a beneficial role to play: in acting as 'woodland edge' habitat; in buffering semi-natural habitats from more intensive land use; and improving ecological functioning at a landscape scale. However, vegetation structure and crop husbandry may make SRC unsuitable for a range of species characteristic of open field landscapes, many of which are in serious decline, particularly farmland birds.

Issues

13. Under current rules, energy crops can be grown on set aside, removing a large-scale breeding and wintering habitat important for a wide range of farmland birds and other species of conservation concern.
14. There has been relatively little research on the biodiversity impact of SRC and studies have been short term and site-centred. Research has not considered impacts on biodiversity on adjacent land or at a landscape scale.
15. SRC plantations should only be planted on sites with low existing conservation value, ideally, adjacent to native woods or open-ground habitats.

Potential Actions

16. The Forestry Commission should recommend a review of the policy governing new plantings to ensure that the biodiversity benefits of existing land-uses are not prejudiced.
17. Further research into the wider biodiversity impacts of SRC is needed, including study of some 'older' established plantations.
18. Better integration and communication of information being gathered on woods, farm woodland and SRC is needed.

RESTORATION OF PRIORITY OPEN-GROUND HABITATS

Background

19. Forestry has a significant role to play in delivering the Government's policies for the implementation of the UK's international obligations for biodiversity. This extends to conservation of open-ground habitats, such as lowland heath, wet grassland, and blanket and raised bogs, and priority species such as black grouse. Habitat restoration or creation through deforestation represents a positive move towards sustainable forestry, and can have broader environmental benefits, such as restoring



hydrological functions within a catchment. There are a number of policy drivers which support deforestation measures for biodiversity:

- Convention on Biological Diversity – the UK Biodiversity Action Plan
- The EU Wild Birds and Habitats Directives
- The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000

20. UK Forestry policy has a presumption in favour of maintaining existing woodland, except where overriding public benefits would result from permanent deforestation. The Forestry Act 1967 and the Wildlife and Countryside (Amendment) Act 1985 place an obligation on the Forestry Commission to achieve a reasonable balance between timber and wildlife objectives. The unfavourable status of certain open-ground habitats has been due to long-term land-use changes (e.g. a 40 per cent reduction in lowland heathland since 1950), including losses to forestry planting. It is an object of public policy to restore the balance back to a favourable status in the extent of such habitats.
21. The England Forestry Strategy acknowledges the role of tree removal in re-creating important open habitats. The UK Woodland Assurance Scheme supports deforestation for biodiversity as an important requirement in good forestry practice. The Forestry Commission has recognised that biodiversity is a legitimate public benefit and, as a matter of policy, no longer requires compensatory planting where restoration of open ground achieves biodiversity objectives.
22. UK BAP objectives for restoration of open-ground habitats are being delivered through a wide range of strategic partnerships drawn from the statutory and voluntary sectors, supported by EU, national and local government, the lottery and charitable funds. The design and execution of projects needs to take account of the planning process and the response of local communities to landscape change. Opportunities exist on agricultural land and old mineral workings, as well as forestry. However, afforested areas frequently offer the best opportunities in terms of ecological achievability, linkage with existing habitats and relict populations, and best value for public monies. Delay of tree removal can increase costs and reduce restoration potential.

Issues

23. There is a need to address potentially conflicting UK BAP priorities, which may arise from restoration of open habitats from native woodland.
24. The Forestry Commission consulted GB-wide on its approach to restoration of open-ground habitats almost a year ago. It is understood that the Forestry Commission may be organising a GB workshop to further develop policy guidance, however, it is unclear how this issue will be progressed in England.
25. Good opportunities exist for restoring open-ground habitats through deforestation but progress has been limited due partly to a lack of integration between policies designed to protect forests and those encouraging restoration of open habitat. Generally, it has been the smaller scale restructuring of existing forests, which has contributed towards open-habitat restoration. Within Forest Enterprise forest districts this has been achieved through the Forest Design Plan process. The planning and



executing of larger restoration projects needs to be increased to achieve UK BAP targets.

26. Deforestation has progressed under the Woodland Grant Scheme but grant conditions do not readily enable more extensive habitat restoration. Tree removal is limited currently to 20 per cent of the woodland area, and the securing of future maintenance of the open ground created also needs to be considered.

Potential Actions

27. The Forestry Commission should establish policy principles that reconcile potential conflicts between UK BAP priorities.
28. The Forestry Commission needs to agree priority areas at a strategic level and actions with English Nature and voluntary conservation bodies. Within this framework, sites for restoration should be targeted.
29. The Forestry Commission should revise Woodland Grant Scheme conditions to encourage more extensive open-ground restoration, where appropriate, and secure long term management through integration with agri-environment schemes.

BIODIVERSITY OF NON-NATIVE WOODLAND (EXCLUDING PAWS)

Background

30. Priorities for the UK BAP are largely addressed through specific individuals species actions plans, however there are general issues concerning the biodiversity value of this extensive habitat type.
31. The England Forestry Strategy adopts a multi-purpose approach, which recognises that biodiversity is an important consideration for the management of new and existing plantations. Many well-designed coniferous plantations are now planted with biodiversity in mind. The Woodland Grant Scheme provides an opportunity to enhance the biodiversity of existing plantations and work is covered by the UK Forestry Standard.

Issues

32. Fifty per cent of plantations are not entered into the Woodland Grant Scheme and their potential value for biodiversity may be unfulfilled. There may also be cases where the development of an old growth structure would be the most beneficial management regime.
33. Site monitoring associated with the Woodland Grant Scheme or Forest Enterprise Forest Plans may be insufficient to determine changes in the range of habitats and stand structure within plantations and their impact on biodiversity.
34. There are indications that Woodland Grant Scheme conditions may limit scope to improve biodiversity. There may be cases where the development of an old growth structure may be the most beneficial management regime.



Potential Actions

35. It should be a priority for the Forestry Commission to find ways of engaging with all forest owners and offer assistance.
36. The Forestry Commission needs to establish biodiversity measures for the assessment and monitoring of plantations, which take account of their general contribution to biodiversity.
37. The Woodland Grant Scheme should provide enhanced rates of grant for use of local provenance of native trees and should be more flexible, for example, encouraging lower planting densities, a higher percentage of shrubs or more than 20 per cent open ground, where appropriate. Greater integration with DEFRA agri-environment schemes should be sought to maximise benefit for biodiversity.

ROLE OF WOODLAND WITHIN FLOODPLAINS

Background

38. Wet woodland is the subject of a Native Woodland Habitat Action Plan, so the England Native Woodland Partnership may best address this topic further in relation to biodiversity.
39. Wet woodland is important for a number of priority species including otters, all UK bat species and four species of crane fly. This habitat once formed much of the natural vegetation cover and landscape of floodplains but has largely disappeared. It now exists in isolated fragments in southern and lowland England or as recent regeneration on the fringes of former peat working in the Broads, Cheshire or the Brue valley in Somerset.
40. The UK BAP identifies wet woodland as a priority habitat covering around 50,000 hectares of which approximately half is of long-established semi-natural origin.
41. There is a developing network of fluvial protected landscapes in the EU, and evidence for policy making can be drawn from examples such as the post-1945 floodplain woodland in the Ticino catchment in Lombardy, restoration schemes in the Upper Rhine, as well as well-documented projects in the USA and Australia.

Issues

42. HAP targets for restoration and expansion total 10,000 hectares by 2015 but it seems unlikely that these will be achieved without clear changes in policy priorities.
43. The multifunctional benefits of wet woodland are less well recognised in the UK than in other countries. Although there are proposals for pilot projects, such as the Parrett Catchment Project supported by English Nature and the Environment Agency, it will be some years before they produce firm conclusions.



44. In addition to UK BAP targets, other land-use policy drivers need to be considered, notably the implementation of the Water Framework Directive, the response to recent major flood events and the need for adaptation strategies in relation to climate change.

Potential Actions

45. National policy needs to identify more clearly the role of wet woodland in flood attenuation, reducing soil erosion, improving water quality, and enhancing biodiversity.
46. The Forestry Commission needs to work with the Environment Agency to facilitate creation of extensive wet woodland thereby making a major and sustainable contribution to delivery of the Water Framework Directive, responses to recent major flood events and development of adaptation strategies in relation to climate change.
47. The Forestry Commission and DEFRA should seek integration of agri-environment and forestry grant regimes to promote expansion of wet woodland on floodplains.
48. The Forestry Commission should identify needs for research, pilot projects and demonstration sites, in conjunction with the statutory and voluntary nature conservation bodies, together with appropriate resources for action.

LANDSCAPE-SCALE CONSERVATION

Background

49. This is a cross-cutting topic which relates directly to delivery of the Native Woodland Habitat Action Plan, which is being addressed by the England Native Woodland Partnership.
50. The traditional approach to nature conservation has been to establish a series of designated sites and reserves. Many designation and reserves strategies have focused entirely inward on sites. At best they may have looked more widely but only on the basis of the status quo in terms of surrounding land use and climate. Facing a period of potentially dramatic climate change, there is growing realisation that action needs to be taken to create ecologically functional landscapes through the creation of further semi-natural habitats (both woodland and open ground), enabling natural regeneration processes and through agriculture that is more environmentally-friendly. At the same time, there is an increasing appreciation that these landscapes need not be at odds with society's needs and that they can contribute towards rural development, flood alleviation, recreation and tourism, as well as economic and other benefits that enhance quality of life.



51. The extent of interest is reflected by the wide range of government agencies and NGOs involved in the 'Rebuilding Biodiversity Initiative' chaired by Chris Baines, the writer and broadcaster, which led to the 'Living Landscapes' conference in May. In addition, many organisations are developing strategic thinking, as illustrated by English Nature's 'Lifescapes' project, and documents such as the RSPB's 'Futurescapes', WWF's UK report on forest habitat networks or the Woodland Trust's 'Space for nature'.

Issues

52. Landscape-scale thinking has developed significantly since the England Forestry Strategy was launched.

Potential Actions

53. This topic demands a paradigm shift in the development and implementation of policy and all recommendations by the Forum should be proofed accordingly.

Mike Clarke
Working Group Leader
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