

FORESTRY COMMISSION – RESTORING AND EXPANDING OPEN HABITATS FROM WOODS AND FOREST IN ENGLAND

Comments from Birmingham & Black Country Wildlife Trust (Chris Parry Principal Ecologist)

The perspective for our comments is provided by the large urban conurbation in which we undertake our biodiversity / nature conservation / community and education work. Two million people live, work and play in the conurbation. Their requirements and needs not only produce an urban living landscape but also lead to pressures, impacts and demands on it, especially the semi-natural elements.

Large and small local organisations working within the conurbation and the public are keenly aware that their local environment is a key part of their quality of life. They are not slow to let decision-makers, planners, land managers or others know when the quality of their local environment is threatened with, or is damaged by, the pressures, impacts and demands made on it. B&BCWT's experience of this concern only too well illustrates some of the important issues at the heart of this particular Forestry Commission consultation. These are the importance of communication and the use of evidence to justify management.

An example which illustrates the difficulties which can arise relates to Sutton Park National Nature Reserve, a long-standing SSSI within Birmingham owned and managed by the City Council. The SSSI notification says that "Sutton Park lies 10km from the middle of Birmingham surrounded by the built-up areas of Sutton Coldfield and Walsall. It is essentially over 860Ha of wild, unenclosed country within an urban area and contains the largest and richest areas of ancient woodland, heath and wetland in the County. The Park is of outstanding importance in the context of the Midlands conurbation for the extent and diversity of its habitats and the species richness of its plant communities."

Sutton Park is also of considerable archaeological and historical importance, and is also designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument. In the 11th century, Sutton Park was part of a Royal Forest and Domesday Book shows the site to have been wooded. It is a fine example of a large mediaeval park of the compartmented type, that is with a separation between trees and grazing by enclosure of some of the woodlands (the Seven Hays), the whole park being surrounded by a fence, the park pale. Henry VIII presented the Park to the inhabitants of Sutton Coldfield by Royal Charter in 1528 and it has remained as a natural area for public enjoyment.

In the 1990s, following concern by English Nature about the site's condition, the City Council began management to restore the site's open character, especially to benefit the dry and wet heath, by removing extensive areas of birch scrub and woodland which had encroached. Local residents and Park users complained

loudly at the time with the local media full of stories of how the City Council was destroying / vandalising the Park and had no care for the residents and users. "Whoever heard of orchids growing in Sutton Park" was a line from one of the letters in the local press.

There was a perception that the woodland, scrub and trees were more important than the heathland, mires and acid grassland. It took a long time for the City Council and English Nature to counter the public's concern about the Park's welfare. In 1997, the Sutton Park was declared a National Nature Reserve, on the back of progress towards achieving favourable condition. In the intervening period, further scrub removal has taken place and sympathetic grazing regimes have been introduced.

In the last 15 months, work has been taking place to prepare a new management plan (as required by NE) in line with NNR / SSSI status and its important heritage and archaeological features, but also involving and consulting the Friends of Sutton Park, local people and stakeholders (including the Forestry Commission). A consortium of stakeholders, enabled by the City Council and its consultants, has been involved in writing the new plan including the Wildlife Trust, English Heritage, Alison Millward Associates and Atkins Global Consultancy. An initial Visioning Event was held to highlight the work ahead and look at what people felt about the Park and what it was valuable for. Progress has been reported along the way and there has been opportunity to hear feedback and act on comments. October 2009 is the deadline for the submission of the plan. From the Trust's perspective, this has not been a perfect journey and there have been frustrations along the way. There cannot be much doubt that the Park and those that care about it are in a better place now than they were in the 1990s when the first birch trees were cut down. Consensus has been the achievement to date.

All this goes to show that communication and the use of evidence is critical to achieving potential biodiversity gains. Without taking those who care along the journey as well, the gains may well remain as only potential.

Chris Parry
Principal Ecologist

On behalf of the Birmingham & Black Country Wildlife Trust

3rd June 2009