

## **WORKING GROUP 5 - PROTECTION OF ANCIENT WOODLANDS FINAL REPORT**

### **Introduction**

1. This paper is the final report of the Forum's Working Group on the Protection of Ancient Woodlands. The paper reviews the issues examined by the Working Group and conclusions reached. Recommendations for further action are summarised after paragraph 48 below.

### **Working Group Terms of Reference and Membership**

2. The Working Group was asked to consider the extent and nature of threats to semi-natural ancient woodlands and, if appropriate, to propose means of achieving their added protection.
3. The Working Group has considered ancient woodland in its totality, that is Ancient Woodland Sites with plantations (PAWS) as well as Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland sites (ASNW)<sup>1</sup>. There are a number of reasons for taking this approach.
  - The area of semi-natural ancient woodland can be increased through the restoration of ancient woodland sites with plantations (although the nature and extent of this restoration may vary).
  - PAWS sites may be equally important from the point of view of cultural heritage as ASNW e.g. earth banks, charcoal platforms, burial mounds and other historic features are not dependent on the current species of tree cover, but on the human history of the site.
  - This approach better reflects England's commitments under International Forestry Agreements, the UK Habitat Actions Plans for woodland, the UK Forestry Standard, the UK Woodland Assurance Scheme and other voluntary certification schemes. All make specific reference to the role of restoration planted ancient woodland sites as well as to protection of important areas of existing ANSW.
4. Members of the Working Group were:  
  
Mike Townsend, The Woodland Trust (Working Group Leader)  
Edward Brun, Timber Growers Association  
Robert Isles, English Heritage  
Richard Johnson, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

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<sup>1</sup> In this report the term ancient woodland is used except where specific reference to semi-natural woodland is intended.)



Keith Kirby, English Nature  
David Russell, The National Trust  
Jonathan Spencer, Forest Enterprise

5. A draft issues paper was prepared by the Working Group Leader and circulated to working group members for comment. The paper was subsequently amended as a result of comments made, and presented to the full forum meeting. Armed with comments of the full forum the working group met and discussed the structure and content of the report. The report was then drafted by the Group Leader and circulated to the Working Group and the Forestry Commission's co-ordinator for the Group. Various comments made on the draft have been included in this report to the Forum.

## **Background**

6. Ancient woodlands (land continuously wooded since AD1600) is amongst our richest habitats for wildlife; they are also reservoirs of evidence for environmental change, archaeology and economic history, and a source of inspiration for local culture and folklore. Ancient woodland is more likely to be rich in native plants and animals and contain more rare and uncommon species than woods of recent origin.
7. The Ancient Woodland Inventory shows that only 198,000 hectares of semi-natural ancient woodland survive in England. An analysis of the size of individual ancient woods suggests a highly fragmented resource: more than 8 out of 10 individual ancient woods in the Inventory for England and Wales are less than 20 hectares in area. Only 21% of semi-natural ancient woodlands (15% of ancient woodlands) in England are designated as SSSI.
8. The England Forestry Strategy (EFS) calls for a halt in the decline and loss of ancient woodland. Further government policy documents support this position in particular, including:
  - *A better quality of life: A Strategy for sustainable development for the UK* Sections 8.59 and 8.60 (DETR 1999)
  - *Biodiversity; The UK Action Plan steering group report Volume* HMSO 1994
  - *Sustainable forestry; The UK Programme*
9. Whilst the policy position given in the EFS and other documents seems clear, there is currently a gap between policy intention and delivery/implementation on the ground. Evidence indicates that ancient woodland is suffering from two damaging trends:
  - total loss (including incremental loss); and
  - decline in quality



10. The degree and nature of this loss is difficult to assess with accuracy due to a lack of clear information. The following factors were identified by the Group as areas for attention affecting loss and decline of ancient woodland:

- availability of information;
  - development and change of land use;
  - woodland management;
  - climate change;
  - pollution.
11. Recommendations range from calls for action on specific issues to further information gathering in order for sensible measures to be adopted. Many of the recommendations make reference to the Forestry Commission. However the England Forestry Strategy is one of Government and not exclusively of the Forestry Commission, and it is recognised that there may be opportunities for other parts of Government to take forward the recommendations made.

### **Availability of Information**

12. One of the difficulties in determining the rate and extent of loss is the availability of information. Current information on the extent of ancient woodland relies primarily on the Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI) undertaken in the mid 1980s. This only covers woodland over 2 hectares and is not subject to systematic resurvey that might be used to measure changes.
13. Current work linking the AWI to the Forestry Commission's inventory of woodland may help to highlight some discrepancies. Similarly correlation with the Countryside Survey 2000 (CS2000) may show changes since the original AWI. Further re-survey by CS2000, which uses satellite imaging, may be one way of monitoring change. It is to be hoped that the proportionate change between and two surveys will be small.
14. Nonetheless anecdotal evidence suggests that incremental loss is taking place both of woods included within the AWI and of woods under 2 hectares.
15. **It is recommended that English Nature should be measure the nature, extent and rate of loss by:**
- **collecting information on actual cases of loss – 'anecdotal monitoring'.**
  - **through a systematic (temporally) re-survey of the data in the AWI by reference to either the sample squares of the CS2000 or the National Inventory of Trees and Woods (or some other agreed sampling method).**

### **Development and Change of Land Use**

#### ***(a) Planning policy***



16. Development pressure is continuing to lead to the loss of ancient woodland and individual examples are numerous. The major influence over development is the

planning system. At present despite the clear statements in Government Policy (see above) the guidance and advice to planners, either through Planning Policy Guidance (PPG), Circulars, local or regional plans, is at best patchy and at worst completely lacking.

17. This is a problem for many habitats, particularly where they fall outside statutory designations. Whilst this report covers the issue in relation to ancient woodland, Government may wish to consider how the issue of protection of non-designated sites in general (in what is a representative and not an inclusive system) can be addressed. Although the Local Wildlife Site concept is not an explicit part of the community strategy duty in the Local Government Act 2000 it is hoped that the Local Authorities will consider this in preparing their Environmental strategies as required under the Act. The outcome of the amendment to the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill tabled by Lord Beaumont of Whitley is not known at the time of writing.
18. The planning system creates, through national guidance, the context for the production of structure plans and local plans, which then shape individual planning decisions. Most of these decisions are discretionary and based not on statutory protection such as the SSSI notification (only 15% of ancient woodland in England is covered by SSSI status in any event) but on interpretation of policy and planning priorities in a local context.
19. There are few specific references to ancient woodland within the Town & Country planning system. The extent to which its protection is embodied within local plans, which have a potentially huge impact on the survival or otherwise for ASNW, is very limited.
20. **It is recommended that DETR should issue guidance on the importance and protection of ancient woodland is specifically built in to formal planning guidance through a Woods and Trees PPG (as recommended through the planning working group of the England Forestry Forum) and/or other PPGs and Circulars of relevance, for example PPG9, Nature Conservation.**
21. **Given that a few Local Plans have incorporated the importance and protection of ancient woodland it is recommended that a systematic survey of local plans is undertaken by DETR to determine the extent to which they reflect Government policy in this area, and that subsequently measures are put in place to ensure that national policy is adequately reflected.**
22. **It is recommend that DETR should ensure that the current draft guidance for local authorities on the preparation of community strategies includes reference to the desirability of establishing a system of local wildlife sites as part of local strategies.**

#### **(b) General Permitted Development Order**



23. Some of the problems relating to decline in quality may be the result of entirely legal but none the less damaging activities permitted under the General Permitted Development Order (1995) (4X4 off-road vehicles for instance) for which a formal

planning application is not necessary. There is case history evidence of degradation as a result of activities under the GPDO being used as justification for the loss of ancient woodland in a planning application. However it remains unclear as to the level of activity under the GPDO and how this is affecting ancient woodland.

24. **It is recommended that DETR undertakes a study to ascertain the nature and extent of how the GPDO affects ancient woodland and that recommendations on the future revision of the GPDO should follow.**

### ***(c) Government Agencies***

25. Government agencies and departments have a particular role to play in ensuring that Government policy is understood and interpreted at a regional and local level. The position of the Forestry Commission as non-statutory consultees on planning applications should place them in a position to provide robust information on the importance of ancient woodland and how this is reflected in national policy. It is the feeling of the working group that this opportunity to protect ancient woodland is not being fully exploited. This may be an issue of resources for the Forestry Commission. Additional work at a local plan level (see recommendation at paragraph 21 above) would help in ensuring that strong statements are built into local plans. However this will not obviate the need for responding to specific planning applications which could directly damage or destroy ancient woodland.
26. **It is recommended that the mandate which the Forestry Commission and English Nature have to comment on planning applications is made clear (in particular the role of English Nature in relation to non-SSSI woodland), and that sufficient resources are employed to carry out that mandate.**

### **Management**

27. Historically management of ancient woodland has been shaped by economic need. This has fortuitously in turn led to the survival of associated flora and fauna which have adapted or at least become tolerant of that management. In developing management for ancient woodland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we need to be mindful of the need to create a 'new utility' for woodland. This might be based on a financial rationale (the production and sale of a tangible product) or on other features which society values such as recreation, biodiversity or landscape. Support for forestry must reflect this 'new utility'. A nostalgic view of management in which heavy reference is made to the past may be less than useful.
28. In 1994 the Forestry Commission produced a series of guides on the management of semi-natural woodlands. These have the potential to provide invaluable information to landowners on the value of ancient woodland both for wildlife and as a renewable resource, and the importance of adopting a positive response to the management (even if the management decision is one of minimum intervention).



29. **It is recommended that the Forestry Commission reviews and re-launches (in the current or alternative form) its series of guides on the management of semi-natural woodlands. This should take into account current knowledge and understanding, and current technology, in particular the use of web technology.**
30. Deer are recognised as a problem to the management of woodland throughout England. The recently established 'Deer Initiative' (of which the Forestry Commission have been the principle sponsor) has wide support across all sectors of the forestry world.
31. **It is recommended that the Government ensure that in addition to the current contributions being made by the Forestry Commission and other members of the Deer Initiative, sufficient funding is made available via the Forestry Commission for the initiative to be sustained.**
32. Over grazing by sheep is leading to a lack of regeneration and ultimately to loss of upland ancient woods. However the nature of upland ancient woods is very different from that of the lowlands. A certain level of grazing is important for much of their biodiversity value. Whilst grazing by cattle may be more advantageous than sheep, it is the current overgrazing that is the core issue.
33. **It is recommended that there be further measures through incentives, cross compliance or other mechanisms to encourage farmers to reduce the level of grazing pressure on woodland in the uplands. Action should accordingly be taken by the Forestry Commission, MAFF and English Nature.**
34. **The group welcomes the changes introduced in the recent Rural Development Regulations to base hill farm payments on area rather than stocking levels. However we understand that the position on the control of grazing of woodlands under these provisions may offer less protection than was at first envisaged. We recommend that the position be regularised by MAFF in association with FC as soon as possible.**
35. The level of regeneration in these woods, where the key considerations are likely to be of landscape and biodiversity, need only be relatively low given the time span of woods. Whilst it is clearly essential that sufficient trees reach the canopy to maintain the woodland, the current levels of stocking required by the Woodland Grant Scheme through natural regeneration and the time scale over it must be achieved for these types of woods may be unnecessarily restrictive.
36. **It is recommended that the Forestry Commission and other relevant Government agencies consider how the criteria for the regeneration of upland ancient woodland (where landscape and biodiversity measures are foremost) can be amended to reflect the relatively few trees needed to ensure continuity of the woodland.**



37. There are many cases where ancient woodland planted with conifers might be restored in such a way as to conserve its historic features and improve its biodiversity. The Forestry Commission is shortly to produce a booklet on best practice in the restoration of planted ancient woodland sites based on anecdotal evidence. Others (including the Woodland Trust) are undertaking research on both the economic and ecological aspects of site restoration.
38. **The Forestry Commission should review the WGS and felling licence procedures to capture data on loss of ancient woodland and on planted ancient woodland sites particularly in relation to Habitat Action Plan targets.**

## **Climate Change**

39. Climate change may well pose the greatest threat to ancient woodland and other habitats. The nature of the threat and the opportunities to counter or mitigate that threat largely lie outside the scope of this paper and of forestry in general. But while the causes of climate change may be beyond the scope of this paper, there are actions which can be taken which will make ancient woodland more robust both in the face of climate change and other environmental pressures. The England Forestry Strategy has already recognised the need to reverse fragmentation of ancient woodland. Expansion of ancient woodland through the creation of new woodland adjacent to that which remains will also be important in relation to climate change. It will both increase the opportunities for migration of species and ensure that habitats are of sufficient size to support ecologically sustainable populations.
40. Scale will be an important element. The initiative of the Forestry Commission in developing a challenge fund for the reversal of habitat fragmentation is welcomed however future action on a much larger scale will be needed. Since some of the effects of fragmentation can be offset by linking of ancient woods with other semi-natural non-woodland habitats, a more integrated approach to landscape restoration is needed.
41. By necessity such a programme would have to be targeted. Methodologies and measures for targeting such activity are already developed/being developed both within the voluntary and statutory sectors. These should be used in building a programme and defining target areas.
42. **It is recommended that a clear and defined programme for the expansion of woodland be developed so as to help to meet the need to extend and buffer ancient woodland.**

## **Pollution**

43. In a similar way to the issue of climate change, it was felt that the ability to provide recommendations on possible measures to combat pollution lay outside the scope of the paper. Much of the most significant pollution relates to cars and transport or energy generation.



44. However it is possible to take account of the impacts of pollution from new developments on ancient woodland (or other habitats) at a local, regional and national level. The Forestry Commission as non-statutory consultees on developments affecting ancient woodland should consider how they respond not simply to applications which have a direct impact on sites but also to nearby (and sometimes distant) development that may have a deleterious impact on ancient woodland.
45. **It is recommended that the position of the Forestry Commission in relation to developments, which may have an impact on ancient woodland as a result of pollution, be clarified.**

### **Further Considerations**

46. The paper highlighted areas that the Working Group felt fell outside the scope or current capability of the group to consider. However, there remains a need for these issues to be discussed and taken forward.
47. Climate change poses a significant threat to the future of ancient woodland and other habitats. There is a clear responsibility on Government to consider the impact of climate change and to undertake measures to mitigate its impact. Under the Helsinki Resolution 1 (1) it states that:
- "Efforts should be increased to keep the emissions of air pollutants and greenhouse gases below the expected tolerance levels of forest ecosystems, taking into account the long term cumulative and/or synergistic effects of pollutants".*
48. Roles and responsibilities across Government are key. As the England Forestry Strategy is a strategy for Government, and as such the Forum is in a position to make its views clear and what measures might be taken in relation to Forestry in England. The Forum should consider further how it would like the issue taken forward.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

- 1. It is recommended that English Nature should be measure the nature, extent and rate of loss by:**
  - **collecting information on actual cases of loss – ‘anecdotal monitoring’.**
  - **through a systematic (temporally) re-survey of the data in the AWI by reference to either the sample squares of the CS2000 or the National Inventory of Trees and Woods (or some other agreed sampling method). (Paragraph 15.)**
- 2. It is recommended that DETR should issue guidance on the importance and protection of ancient woodland is specifically built in to formal planning guidance through a Woods and Trees PPG (as**



**recommended through the planning working group of the England Forestry Forum) and/or other PPGs and Circulars of relevance, for example PPG9, Nature Conservation. (Paragraph 20)**



- 3. Given that a few Local Plans have incorporated the importance and protection of ancient woodland it is recommended that a systematic survey of local plans is undertaken by DETR to determine the extent to which they reflect Government policy in this area, and that subsequently measures are put in place to ensure that national policy is adequately reflected. (Paragraph 21.)**
- 4. It is recommend that DETR should ensure that the current draft guidance for local authorities on the preparation of community strategies includes reference to the desirability of establishing a system of local wildlife sites as part of local strategies. (Paragraph 22.)**
- 5. It is recommended that DETR undertakes a study to ascertain the nature and extent of how the GPDO affects ancient woodland and that recommendations on the future revision of the GPDO should follow. (Paragraph 24.)**
- 6. It is recommended that the mandate which the Forestry Commission and English Nature have to comment on planning applications is made clear (in particular the role of English Nature in relation to non-SSSI woodland), and that sufficient resources are employed to carry out that mandate. (Paragraph 26.)**
- 7. It is recommended that the Forestry Commission reviews and re-launches (in the current or alternative form) its series of guides on the management of semi-natural woodlands. This should take into account current knowledge and understanding, and current technology, in particular the use of web technology. (Paragraph 29.)**
- 8. It is recommended that the Government ensure that in addition to the current contributions being made by the Forestry Commission and other members of the Deer Initiative, sufficient funding is made available via the Forestry Commission for the initiative to be sustained. (Paragraph 31.)**
- 9. It is recommended that there be further measures through incentives, cross compliance or other mechanisms to encourage farmers to reduce the level of grazing pressure on woodland in the uplands. Action should accordingly be taken by the Forestry Commission, MAFF and English Nature. (Paragraph 33.)**
- 10. The group welcomes the changes introduced in the recent Rural Development Regulations to base hill farm payments on area rather than stocking levels. However we understand that the position on the control of grazing of woodlands under these provisions may offer less protection than was at first envisaged. We recommend that the position be regularised by MAFF in association with FC as soon as possible. (Paragraph 34.)**



**11. It is recommended that the Forestry Commission and other relevant Government agencies consider how the criteria for the regeneration of upland ancient woodland (where landscape and biodiversity measures are foremost) can be amended to reflect the relatively few trees needed to ensure continuity of the woodland. (Paragraph 36)**



**12. The Forestry Commission should review the WGS and felling licence procedures to capture data on loss of ancient woodland and on planted ancient woodland sites particularly in relation to Habitat Action Plan targets. (Paragraph 38.)**

**13. It is recommended that a clear and defined programme for the expansion of woodland be developed so as to help to meet the need to extend and buffer ancient woodland. (Paragraph 42.)**

**14. It is recommended that the position of the Forestry Commission in relation to developments, which may have an impact on ancient woodland as a result of pollution, be clarified. (Paragraph 45.)**

**Protection of Ancient Woodlands Working Group  
December 2000**

