

Protected Forest Areas

Pan-European Indicators for Sustainable Forest Management: Reporting on Protected Forests and Protective Forest Areas in the UK

Background

The first stage of this work involved developing proposals on how “protected and protective forest areas” should be defined in the UK context. These proposals were set out in a note dated 25 February 2010 and circulated to the countryside agencies in the four UK countries. Responses were received from Keith Kirby (NE), Jeanette Hall (SNH), Jim Latham (CCW) and Dick Schaible (DARD). There was broad agreement to the 25 February proposals, and the respondents provided helpful advice on some areas of uncertainty.

The second stage was to prepare revised proposals on how protected and protective forest areas should be defined in the UK, and how the data should be gathered. These revised proposals were set out in a note dated 31 March 2010, which was circulated to the countryside agencies for their final comments. Further minor comments were received from Keith Kirby, Jeanette Hall and Dick Schaible and these have been incorporated in this final note. The MCPFE return “Enquiry on improved pan-European Indicators for SFM – 2011 final” will now be completed by the Forestry Commission. The expectation is that future returns will incorporate improved data but that the definitions agreed as a result of this exercise will stand for some years.

Responsibility for Data Gathering

The MCPFE returns will continue to be prepared by Forestry Commission GB. A provisional return will be prepared by FC GB in April 2010 using existing data sources. For future returns, after the National Forest Inventory datasets (see below) become available, the forest area data will be prepared by the FC GIS units in England, Scotland and Wales and by DARD in Northern Ireland.

Definition of Forest and Other Wooded Land: Inventories

It has been agreed that the forest data should be based on the National Forest Inventory (NFI) in England, Scotland and Wales. This will be available as GIS datasets in all 3 countries by the end of 2010. The NFI includes all woodlands down to 0.5 hectares (coinciding with the MCPFE definition) and defines woodland as having a minimum potential canopy cover of 20%. This is at variance with the MCPFE definition of 10% but the advantage of using the NFI outweighs this disadvantage.

Protected forest areas

The MCPFE guidelines include a category of “other wooded land” where canopy cover is between 5% and 10% (which we would take to be between 5% and 20% in the UK). There is no obvious source for this data at present and advice is now being sought from the countryside agencies on what a reasonable estimate might be. At some point in the future it may be possible to utilise further FC analysis of the aerial photography used to produce the NFI maps to provide data on “other wooded land”.

There is at present no single woodland inventory equivalent to the NFI in Northern Ireland, but there are various datasets which could be used to provide the estimates.

Definition of Protected and Protective Forest

A. Legal basis and explicit designation for protection of biodiversity.

It has been agreed that this should include all woodland in SSSIs (A/SSSIs in NI) where woodland or woodland dependent species have been identified as a qualifying feature for designation, or contribute to that interest. It should also include all woodland in National Nature Reserves (NNRs), SACs and SPAs where these have not been designated as SSSIs or A/SSSIs. In addition it should include all woodland in Local Nature Reserves. However where there are areas of woodland in any of these designated areas which does not contribute to biodiversity values or provide beneficial habitat to species for which the designation has been made, these areas should be excluded. The main examples of this would be where an area has been designated as an SPA and the bird species being protected does not require the presence of the particular type of woodland. In these cases the FC will seek advice from the countryside agencies on whether the woodland should be included as “protected forest”.

B. Legal basis and explicit designation for the protection of landscapes.

It has been agreed that this should include certain types of woodland in National Parks, Areas of Outstanding National Beauty and National Scenic Areas. The types of woodland to be included are those defined in the NFI as “broadleaf” or “mixed mainly broadleaf” and native pinewood in Scotland. DARD will be invited to provide data on such areas in Northern Ireland, in collaboration with the NI Environment Agency.

In addition it has been agreed that woodland areas covered by Tree Preservation Orders should be included here.

Where a woodland has been designated for biological conservation in an area which has also been designated for landscape protection (e.g. an SSSI in a National Park) the biological designation will take precedence to avoid double counting.

C. Legal basis and explicit designation for protective functions.

It has been agreed that this category does not currently apply in the UK.

Classes for Biological Conservation

The MCPFE return requires that woodland areas identified as being designated for biological conservation should be allocated to one of 3 classes:

- 1.1 No active intervention
- 1.2 Minimum intervention
- 1.3 Conservation through active management

It has been agreed that there is some level of active management in nearly all woodland designated for biological conservation in the UK, particularly the control of animal and insect populations and action against invasive plant and animal species. This rules out Class 1.1 which requires that management should “allow natural processes to operate”. A small area might fall into Class 1.2 which requires that “human intervention is limited to a minimum and that activities other than the control of animal and insect populations, fire prevention measures and non-destructive research are prevented”. It has been agreed that the default class should be Class 1.3, with the countryside agencies invited to advise on the area which should be allocated to Class 1.2.

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