



Position statement: Ancient woods and translocation

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Definitions

The Woodland Trust draws a clear distinction between **species translocation** - a positive conservation strategy to enhance or protect the biodiversity of an area by introducing, reintroducing or restocking carefully selected species - and **habitat translocation**, a term used to describe a mitigation strategy which involves the physical removal of habitats from one location to another in an attempt to offset the impact of development on the wildlife interest of a site.

Species translocation and the Trust's views will be covered in Position Statement 20ⁱ. In the context of ancient woodland, the Trust views the term 'habitat translocation' with total scepticism. In reality the phrase more accurately covers the removal of soil and vegetation of modest size (not mature living trees) from one site to anotherⁱⁱ. Soils and vegetation are the product of geology, climate and biotic influences which in combination are unique to a single place, and they cannot function in isolation from that place.

The term habitat translocation is therefore a misleading one in that it does not reflect the partial nature of what is being moved. It cannot protect ancient woodland (probably the most complex of all habitats and the most reliant on undisturbed conditions for its survival). At best it may create conditions for the re-establishment of relatively natural woodland but this itself is unproven due to the vast length of time required to monitor its effectiveness. The beauty, structure and full biodiversity of an ancient woodland cannot be moved from place to place by a bulldozer.

Background

Development, especially in the South East of England remains one of the key pressures on valuable wildlife habitats. The construction of new roads, railways, airports, housing, out of town shopping complexes, industrial estates, motorway service stations, quarrying, mining and major provision of new facilities for specialist interests often impinges on the existence and integrity of sites important for wildlife, whether covered by a designation or not.

Where there is no possibility of avoiding physical damage or destruction of a habitat because of a lack of alternatives, mitigation measures are usually built in to the conditions of planning permission being granted. Mitigation measures mean steps taken to alleviate the worst impacts of the development upon the site while compensation measures, a term often used synonymously, are steps taken with the intention of putting right the damage caused.

Local authorities often seek to build in proposals for habitat translocation to Section 106 agreements (legally binding conditions imposed by a local planning authority on a developer as a *quid pro quo* for granting planning permission for development).

Scientific review

Scientific literature does not support the assumption that habitat translocation can compensate for habitat loss as a result of development. In a recent study the Highways Agencyⁱⁱⁱ reviewed 14 sites affected by road construction covering different habitat types and different mitigation techniques. Of the six sites containing woodland, individual species rather than habitats were translocated or new planting was undertaken with varying degrees of success but no instances of successful translocation of ancient woodland were reported.

A study for WWF^v identified that it is not possible to attribute outright success in any case due to inadequate setting of aims and subsequent recording of results, reported a number of failures, and concluded that true costs are unknown and results of work are not made widely available. Researchers at Wye College^v concluded that as a technique for re-locating displaced habitats, translocation of soil from woodland is especially problematic owing to the sensitivity of vegetation and the loss of tree canopy cover. Ancient woodland contains many thousands of species of plants, animals and fungi, and any success in ensuring the survival of one or two charismatic species should not be seen as in any way representing translocation of a complete habitat. The stability of an ecosystem is related to its diversity^{vi} and a serious reduction of that diversity is likely to lead to the ecosystem in its previous form collapsing.

The Woodland Trust view

One of the Woodland Trust's long term goal is to ensure no further loss of ancient woodland so in principle we are opposed to development which results in the degradation or destruction of ancient woodland. Given our rejection of the idea that habitat translocation is possible in respect of ancient woodland, the Trust does not regard habitat translocation as a practicable compensation measure

We believe that habitat translocation should not be used to justify development decisions in the name of sustainable development. The fact that habitat translocation cannot be said to be successful compromises the two of the four objectives of sustainable development as outlined in the UK Sustainable Development Strategy^{vii}; 'effective protection of the environment' and 'prudent use of natural resources' surely cannot be taken to mean uprooting what has taken centuries to evolve. The Government's commitment to native woodland protection is clearly outlined in both this document and the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

We believe that planning permission for a development must be decided on the merits of the case without the proposed mitigation measures being taken into account by the planning authority since effective translocation of irreplaceable habitats, particularly ancient woodland, cannot be realised. The planning case must stand or fall on the degree of impact of the proposed development upon existing semi-natural habitats.

In particular we believe that habitat translocation is a particularly inappropriate option in relation to semi-natural ancient woodland, which is finite and irreplaceable^{viii}. Semi-natural ancient woodland has acquired its unique characteristics of undisturbed soils, stable micro-climate and specially adapted species over centuries even millennia, and its cultural history and present day significance are inextricably bound up with its location. The very act of disturbing such a complex ecosystem will compromise its biodiversity and thus its stability. The idea that such an intricate delicate habitat can be moved from one place to another in working order and that all of the thousands of interactions between plants and animals can resume as if nothing had happened is simplistic at best and arrogant at worst.

REFERENCES

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- ^v Hietalahiti M.K. & Buckley G.P. (2000) The effects of soil translocation on an ancient woodland flora. Aspects of Applied Biology 58. 345 –350
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