

Position statement: English regionalism and the environment

Background & summary

English regionalism is one of the key drivers of current Government policy. Increased devolution of powers means that regional institutions and strategies have a significant role in the delivery of environmental policy and therefore in the protection and enhancement of ancient woodland and the expansion of native woodland. The Woodland Trust is actively involved in each English region, managing land and working through relevant regional fora to influence policy.

This statement highlights some key regional institutions and strategies from the Woodland Trust's standpoint and sets out our position on the regional agenda. In essence we wish to see: protection for irreplaceable ancient woodland enhanced through regional planning; the economic agenda of the English regions and institutions balanced by a fundamental regard for the environment expressed in new regional strategies; a strong regional presence for the new 'Integrated Agency' for the countryside; forestry widely accepted as an exemplar of sustainable development; and accountable Regional Assemblies with environmental and sustainable development purposes.

Government Offices for the Regions

These were established in 1994 to bring together the regional functions of government departments. There are nine Government Offices funded and staffed by ten sponsor Government departments.

Regional Development Agencies (RDAs)

As part of the Government's commitment to increase competitiveness in the English regions and a shift towards English regionalism to complement devolution for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) have been established. Their broad aim is to co-ordinate regional economic development and regeneration including many aspects of rural development such as training and marketing, and to this end they produce Regional Economic Strategies. RDAs have five statutory purposes:

- To further economic development and regeneration;
- To promote business efficiency, investment and competitiveness;
- To promote employment;
- To enhance development and application of skills relevant to employment
- To contribute to sustainable development

Regional Assemblies

Appointed Regional Assemblies made up of local authority and stakeholder representatives exist in each English region (apart from London which has a directly elected Greater London Assembly). As well as contributing to and scrutinising the RDA Regional Economic Strategies, Regional Assemblies act as designated planning bodies reviewing Regional Spatial Strategies (see below) and the work of other public bodies and strategies operating at a regional level. However, there are concerns that they lack the necessary resources to carry out this role and that the chief lines of accountability for RDAs remain direct to central Government.

The Government's Regional Governance White Paper, *Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions* (2002) and the Regional Assemblies (Preparation) Act (2003) paved the way for directly elected Regional Assemblies where consent is established through a regional referendum. However the vote against a Regional Assembly in the North East referendum on 4 November 2004 and the decision not to proceed with referendums in the North West, and Yorkshire & the Humber have now cast doubt over the future for effective regional scrutiny.

Regional Spatial Strategies

Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs) were introduced under the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act (2004). By the end of 2006 all English regions will have an RSS in place replacing Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) and County Structure Plans. The RSSs should provide the long term (15-20 years) spatial planning framework by

integrating all regional strategy documents and drawing together regional plans for housing, planning, environmental protection, economic development, agriculture, transport and waste. They are therefore of the utmost importance to achieving sustainable development and unlike RPG, RSSs have a statutory basis. In addition, Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks have been produced in each region in line with Government guidance. Regional Biodiversity Strategies are also underway though they have no statutory basis.

Regional Forestry Frameworks (RFFs)

Regional Forestry Frameworks grew from a recommendation of the England Forestry Forum that each region including London should produce a regional forestry strategy to translate the England Forestry Strategy (EFS) at the regional level. The guidance for their preparation states that 'they should be viewed as a means of connecting the EFS with regional agendas in language and approaches that have a resonance with the needs of each region'. Frameworks for each region will be in place by spring 2005. The Forestry Commission will use them to guide its work and to prioritise funding in each Conservancy and it is generally accepted that the RDAs will also use the RFFs to guide their funding of forestry activity. Yorkshire Forward and the NW RDA are already keen to invest in forestry projects. The production of RFFs has been facilitated by Forestry Commission's regional Conservators along with Government Offices and the Regional Chamber or Assembly through a steering group. This process has secured a wider buy-in to the benefits of forestry from different sectors than in the past.

The Woodland Trust View

Enhanced protection for ancient woodland through planning

One of the biggest current threats to ancient woodland is development pressure, much of this related to housing, employment and transport. We believe that Regional Spatial Strategies must achieve integration between the economic and social needs of the population and the protection of our environment for future generations. That balance must be set so that ancient woodland, our richest habitat for wildlife and an irreplaceable natural resource, can be ensured survival. In addition, the development of Regional Spatial Strategies offers for the first time the exciting possibility of planning land use in an integrated way at a landscape scale in response to climate change and to deliver wider socio-economic benefits through the environment such as flood relief.

Economic regeneration balanced by environmental regard

Our particular concern has been that the emphasis placed on economic regeneration by RDAs has resulted in environmental concerns being pushed off the regional agenda and we regret that RDAs do not have an explicit environmental or rural role given the importance of current CAP reform.. The Trust believes that RDAs must pursue all four main strands of sustainable development as defined by government (social well-being, economic well-being, prudent use of natural resources and environmental protection) in an integrated way. Their enhanced role in rural policy delivery following Defra's 2004 Rural Strategy for England makes this all the more important.

A strong regional voice for the new Integrated Agency

We therefore advocate the emergence of a strong regional dimension to the new Integrated Agency to be set up in England by 2007 bringing together the work of English Nature, the Countryside Agency and Rural Development Service, which will also be key in providing an environmental voice to balance the strong economic and social interests of the RDAs.

Forestry as an exemplar of sustainable development

The Trust believes that safeguarding and enhancement of key natural resources such as ancient woodland is a key test of success in achieving sustainable development in the regions. We welcome the introduction of Regional Forestry Frameworks which recognises that 'one size doesn't fit all'. They provide an opportunity to show how forestry can deliver on a diverse range of issues at a regional level from biodiversity to health and quality of life. The Trust believes that multi purpose forestry has a unique contribution in assisting RDAs to successfully pursue sustainable development. An enhanced local environment is key to attracting inward investment. Forestry has an important role to play in relation to economic regeneration, both through improving landscapes scarred following the decline of traditional industries, and through the enhancement of existing green space. The National Forest in the Midlands is an excellent example of a forestry initiative which is rapidly transforming the regional landscape and on which the tourism industry is beginning to build.

Accountable Regional Assemblies with a sustainable development purpose

If more accountable Regional Assemblies are eventually established, then we believe that it is essential that their statutory purpose should be to further sustainable development in a manner which integrates economic, social and environmental dimensions. Central to their work should be to ensure that regional strategies are compatible with regional sustainable development objectives and with central Government guidance on environment and biodiversity policies.