



Planted Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) - what's the big deal?

We are calling for restoration of all the Forestry Commission's damaged ancient woods to their rightful place as jewels in the crown of our native woodland heritage.

The Government's plans to sell off the public forest estate brought to the fore an issue the Trust has been pressing for some time - restoration commitments the Forestry Commission set itself some time ago for the 600 Planted Ancient Woodland sites (PAWS) on its estate. Research¹ has shown that in nearly all PAWS, historic features and remnant habitats still survive in amongst the plantation crop.

What's the problem?

Out of over 45,000 ha of planted ancient woodland on the estate, less than 2,000 ha have been fully restored to date². The Woodland Trust advocates a gradual approach to restoration and so in itself this may not be a problem. From the Forestry Commission (FC)'s own figures however, progress through the stages of restoration they have set themselves for these sites seems slow.

Our specific fears are for the PAWS sites on the estate that have been planted with conifer. We are particularly concerned that not enough attention has been directed toward the most heavily conifer-dominated sites - comprising over 23,000 ha - which we would consider in need of the most urgent action if the remnant ancient woodland features they still contain are to be saved.

Our main and enduring concern is that, should PAWS sites be sold without appropriate restoration already completed, a new owner would be unlikely to have either the resources or the inclination to undertake this vital work. In the worst case scenario the existing conifers could be replaced with another crop of the same. This is likely to be the final straw for any remnant features.

Why is this important?

PAWS can be planted with various tree species but non-native conifer plantations can have a particularly negative impact on the ecology of ancient woods - firstly through the process of establishing them, which nearly always involved site clearance and herbicide use; and subsequently from the effects of the dense shade they cast. Evergreen conifers suppress the growth of other plants, preventing flowering and seed setting whilst the leaf litter is acidic and can change the soil chemistry. Further, the species of conifer and the success with which it has been established vary considerably, with lighter canopied pines and larches being generally less damaging than spruces and firs. The conservation potential of these dark, crowded plantations so often remains hidden. Although habitats have been damaged by these plantations, they have not been destroyed.

The window of opportunity for repairing the damage done to the ancient woodland habitat is limited - most of the conifers on these sites are ready to be harvested now.

¹ http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/pdf/Restoration_PAWS_report1.pdf

² R. Edwards, 'Environmental Status Report – the Public Forest Estate in England' (2009) Forestry Commission

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The special habitat of PAWS is frequently misunderstood. Worse, Government itself does not appear to recognise the conservation potential of PAWS. This was made especially clear in its consultation document 'Future of the Public Forest Estate' in which PAWS – despite being ancient woods - were assigned 'commercially valuable' rather than 'heritage' status and included as part of leasehold proposals for commercial forests. The plans this consultation was based on may have since been abandoned, but PAWS sites on the public estate were being sold right up to December 2010, when sales were postponed pending a review of the Government's sales criteria. State-owned PAWS woods can, and are still likely to, be sold in the future.

What does restoration involve?

PAWS restoration must be done sensitively and so can take a long time. When it comes to the costs of implementing the restoration process this varies hugely, being dependent on individual site factors - but can range from costing thousands of pounds per hectare to making a net profit of hundreds of pounds per hectare. More information about the value of ancient woodland restoration and also a guide for woodland owners and managers [is available](#).

What does the Woodland Trust want?

Our petition calls for "restoration of all the Forestry Commission's conifer planted ancient woods to their rightful place as jewels in the crown of our native woodland heritage".

The Trust's preferred option is that the FC restore its PAWS sites themselves, given they have committed to do so. We think that there are enough commitments on paper to hold the FC to account on restoring the PAWS they (still and will continue to) own. And we continue to press the FC on the quality of their PAWS restoration work through contact with the auditors on their FSC certification.

Our understanding is that current forestry legislation permits the FC to lease land to others for purposes other than forestry but not for forestry, so the Trust is not able to lease or manage sites on the FC's behalf. We have said that we would be willing to help by partnering the FC to ensure restoration, if that is what it takes, but only if we received adequate and sustainable funding to do so.

What about the Trust's PAWS sites?

The Woodland Trust owns 157 PAWS sites totalling 2,600 ha, all of which are in a process of restoration. We mostly use contractors in our PAWS restoration work and occasionally work can be suitable for volunteers to undertake as well.

The Trust is home to a dedicated team of PAWS experts who work around the UK, including the top PAWS expert in the country. For more details about the Trust's PAWS restoration strategy and activities please contact: conservation@woodlandtrust.org.uk.

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