

Translocation

What is Translocation?

Translocation is defined as the wholesale removal of a functioning habitat from one area to another. Increasingly it is being suggested as a form of environmental compensation for proposed developments.

However, translocation is not feasible for ancient woodland. Natural England¹ clearly states that an “ancient woodland ecosystem cannot be moved”. Industry guidance² on translocation also considers that translocation of high value sites such as ancient woodland is only “an appropriate activity to salvage and create a new habitat of some value, albeit a lower one than lost”.



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In reality, translocation of ancient woodland means soil from the woodland will be scraped up, put in the back of a lorry and moved to a new location. Other elements, such as coppice stools, shrubs and dead wood may also be moved but generally whole trees are not. Some animals may be moved, such as dormice, but other species must be left to recolonise (or not) at their own pace.

All published work (including the translocation Best Practice Guide², the JNCC Translocation Policy for Britain³ and the Natural England Standing Advice for Ancient Woodland¹) states that translocation of ancient woodland is only ever an option of last resort. Whatever grows as a result will never be as valuable. Therefore, translocation can only be considered as compensation for habitat destruction, not mitigation, and translocation of ancient woodland soil is not an appropriate alternative to conservation in situ.

The Woodland Trust undertook a review of the limited published work on translocation available⁴ and found a lack of evidence to suggest it is a successful process. It is very expensive and the costs and benefits should be weighed up against, for example, planting a much larger new wood without salvaging soils.

Stages of Translocation

There are four main stages to the translocation process:

1. Identifying a suitable receptor site

The initial stage of translocation is to identify a receptor site where the new wood will be created using soil from the ancient wood to be destroyed (the donor). The receptor site should be as close to the donor site as possible in terms of hydrology, aspect, underlying soil type and size to minimise the chances of translocation failing.

2. Translocation of soil and any other habitat features from the donor site to the receptor site

Translocation of the soil must take place in late autumn/early winter when plants typical of ancient woodland are dormant. Ideally soil would be removed as turves to keep the layers of soil intact and minimise disturbance. However, in practice this is very difficult because of the presence of large tree roots, so the soil is scraped up and the layers are all mixed. This mixing will likely disrupt positive associations between soil microbial communities and the plants growing on the undisturbed soil.

These relationships are not well understood but must be considered a part of the translocation process. Scraping up the soil also damages bulbs and alters the depth at which they are planted, which can affect their ability to establish at the new site. The receptor site will then be planted with new trees that may or may not have been sourced locally.

3. Management of the receptor site

Subsequent to the translocation being completed, the site will have to be actively managed to ensure that the new community develops as required. If left unmanaged growth of species typical of disturbed ground (referred to as ruderal species) will get out of hand and can prevent woodland species from taking hold. It is vital that a robust management plan is in place before any soil is translocated.



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4. Monitoring and reporting on the development of the receptor site

Finally the new site will need to be monitored and the findings published to enable a peer review of the translocation process. Industry guidelines recommend a monitoring period of at least 20-25 years for ancient woodland translocation. The longest monitoring period found by the Woodland Trust was 10 years – nowhere near long enough for systems as complex and slow to develop as ancient woodland. HS2 Ltd has stated that they will monitor receptor sites for 50 years and we expect the same for phase 2a and 2b⁵.

Currently there is no standard method to measure if translocation of ancient woodland soils has been successful. Without a method to measure success or failure it is not possible for developers to provide clear objectives for a proposed translocation.

If translocation fails, very little, if anything, can be done to put it right. At present there is no safety net in the planning system to cover this eventuality, making the process very risky indeed.

The Seed Bank

The seed bank⁶ is the term used to refer to dormant seeds contained within a soil profile. One of the reasons the translocation of soil is often stated to be more successful than planting a new wood on existing soil is that the soil from the ancient woodland contains the ancient woodland seed bank.

However, this is misleading because plants typical of ancient woodland do not tend to reproduce by seeds that are deposited in the seed bank. Therefore, the seeds found in the soils of ancient woodland often do not represent the plants/trees currently growing in the soil. The seeds within the seed bank of ancient woods tend to be dominated by more persistent ruderal species that are waiting for disturbance (i.e. the digging up of soil) to provide ideal conditions for them to germinate.



WTML/ Jill Jennings

References

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3. JNCC (2003) *A habitats translocation policy for Britain*, Joint Nature Conservation
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5. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437413/E26_-_Indicative_Periods_for_the_Management_and_Monitoring_of_Habitats_v1.1.pdf
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