

Position Statement

Ancient Woodland

January 2017



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The Trust's view

- Ancient woods are irreplaceable, yet they cover only 2 per cent of the UK. There should be no further loss of ancient woodland.
- Protection for ancient woodland must be maintained and strengthened. More ancient woodland should be protected by statutory designation (only 15 per cent of ancient woodland in Great Britain has a protective legal designation such as Site of Special Scientific Interest). Protection through planning policy, along with the guidance to planning authorities, should be reviewed with better safeguards for ancient woodland.
- We would like to see new voluntary mechanisms introduced to protect, manage and restore ancient woodland, such as conservation covenants, in addition to more statutory protection.
- Ancient woods planted with non-native conifers are in danger of losing biodiversity value if felled and replanted again with conifers. We would like to see all such woods put into a process of restoration.
- We would also like to see creation of new habitat, including native woodland, around existing ancient woods to extend and buffer this important woodland habitat. We would also like to see more trees and woodland in the wider landscape to increase ecological connectivity between areas of ancient woodland, creating resilient wooded landscapes in line with the principles set out in the Lawton Review in England.

- In order to conserve and develop their wildlife value, ancient woods require sensitive and appropriate management in line with principles of sustainable forest management, and woodland managers need appropriate guidance and incentives to encourage this.

The Trust will

- Campaign to improve protection for ancient woodland through legislation and policy at a UK, country, regional and local level.
- Campaign against threats to individual ancient woods, especially where they illustrate generic issues that need to be addressed nationally or have the potential to increase public awareness of the threats to our ancient woodland heritage; and support local communities in campaigning against threats to ancient woodland.
- Consider acquiring ancient woods that are directly threatened where there is no other way of averting the threat.
- Work with statutory agencies to continue to improve and update records of ancient woodland and methods of identifying ancient woodland, including wood pasture and parkland, and lobby for proper recording of ancient woodland loss.
- Promote sustainable and sensitive management of ancient woodland, including restoration.
- Promote ancient woodland as a key resource for enhancing people's quality of life and focus for increasing appreciation of the importance of the environment.



Background

The concept of ancient woodland was developed to describe land thought to have been continuously wooded since at least the Middle Ages. For practical and policy purposes, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the statutory agencies agree on a threshold date of 1600, while in Scotland, the date used is 1750. The difference is due to different map sources used to identify ancient woods in each country. These thresholds are based on the fact that at around this time more reliable maps began to be available, and before this planting was less common, so woods dating continuously from this period are more likely to have developed naturally and in some cases could be a direct link to the wildwood that colonised the UK after the last ice age. While most ancient woods have been managed at some point in their past, their long continuity of woodland cover means they support unique communities of plants and animals, undisturbed soils, and cultural features.

Ancient semi-natural woodland is composed of mainly native tree species that have not obviously been planted. In planted ancient woodland sites, the former tree cover has been replaced by felling and replanting, often with non-native trees.

Ancient woodland covers around 2 per cent of the UK and is irreplaceable. Its wildlife communities are generally richer than those of recent woods, having developed over long periods of time. It contains a high proportion of rare and vulnerable species, many of which require the stable conditions that ancient woodland affords. Ancient woods are also treasure troves of historical features, including evidence of past woodland management.

Records of ancient woodland

Ancient woodland inventories were produced by the Nature Conservancy Council for England, Wales and Scotland in the 1980s and 90s, and by the Woodland Trust for Northern Ireland in 2007. The sources used to produce these differ between countries. Ancient woodland inventories are a spatial record of the extent and location of the resource. Given that new information can always come to light to change understanding of a site's antiquity, these are subject to continual review

Revision and update has occurred in some parts of England and the whole of Wales in recent years. Wood pasture and parkland was not systematically included, except in Northern Ireland.

Ancient woodland under threat

Between 1930 and the production of the inventories in the 1980s, 7 per cent of the remaining ancient woodland in England and Wales was permanently cleared and 38 per cent converted to plantation. Around a third of the UK's ancient woodland has been planted with non-native conifers.

Policy protection for ancient woodland exists, but the Woodland Trust still deals with new cases of ancient woodland under threat from development each month. Ancient woods are also vulnerable to the effects of surrounding intensive land-use, from grazing and browsing, pests and disease, and climate change. Cessation of active management is also linked to declines in species diversity in some ancient woods.

The UK's remaining ancient woods are mainly small and fragmented: most ancient woods are too small to sustain populations of many woodland species and are too isolated to allow migration, especially given that many ancient woodland species are relatively immobile. As climate change accelerates, species unable to relocate may face local extinction. Only 15% of ancient woodland in Great Britain is covered by Site of Special Scientific Interest/Area of Special Scientific Interest or Special Area of Conservation designation. The remainder, including 14 of the 46 largest ancient semi-natural woods in Great Britain, has no statutory protection.

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