

Position Statement

Hedges and hedgerows

February 2013



WOODLAND
TRUST



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The Woodland Trust view

- Hedgerows should be protected and conserved, especially those with ancient woodland features or ancient trees, though other hedges can also support wildlife and deliver ecosystem services
- New hedgerow creation should be encouraged as part of wider action to make landscapes more permeable and habitable for wildlife. Hedges with trees are better for wildlife than those without.
- Hedgerow creation is also a simple way to engage people with environmental action
- Farming practices should be encouraged that protect hedges and hedgerow trees from livestock and cultivation damage or agricultural chemicals e.g. establishing buffer strips, and reducing inputs.
- Appropriate management of hedgerows should be encouraged to benefit wildlife e.g coppicing or laying, and pollarding of hedgerow trees. If flailing has to be done, it should avoid breeding seasons and autumn/early winter when hedges offer a vital food source.

The Woodland Trust will

- Encourage local authorities in England and Wales to exercise their powers under the Hedgerow Regulations to protect important hedgerows, and lobby for a landscape criterion in the Regulations giving local authorities more discretion to protect locally important hedgerows
- Encourage and lobby for better protection of important trees in hedges
- Support communities or take action itself to fight threats to particularly important hedgerows, especially if these contain ancient trees or ancient woodland features
- Lobby for better protection for hedgerows and hedgerow trees in legislation and policy, as well as for incentives for creation of new, wildlife-friendly hedgerows (including replacement of lost hedgerows) and restoration and more sensitive management of existing hedgerows
- Facilitate hedgerow planting by local groups, schools and communities, for example through provision of hedge and copse planting packs
- Create new hedgerows with trees, and appropriately manage existing hedgerows on our own estate where this fits with our objectives.

Background

A hedgerow includes both the hedge and features such as banks, trees, walls, fences and gates. Hedgerows vary from single species, recently planted hedges, to ancient hedges with high species diversity. Ancient hedges can date back thousands of years; they probably became common in the Bronze age, and the pattern of hedges and fields established in Anglo Saxon times has changed little in some areas of Britain. Ancient hedges are those dating back before the Enclosure Acts between 1720-1840 which resulted in about 200,000 miles of new hedges.

Hedgerows can be locally distinctive (e.g the holly hedges of Arden, Scots pine hedges of the Brecks) and are a defining characteristic in many rural landscapes, with cultural, historical and aesthetic importance. They provide shade, shelter and containment for livestock, cover for game and pollinating insects, fodder, fuel and fruits from trees and act as windbreaks, reducing soil erosion and improving efficiency of water use by crops.

They also form the primary habitat for at least 27 species of conservation concern, including 13 which are globally threatened or rapidly declining. Where there are trees in the hedge they are particularly important for butterflies, moths, many species of birds, bats and dormice. Where hedgerows are ancient or are remnants of ancient woodland, they act as a refuge for woodland plants or ancient trees, which themselves play host to important assemblages of decaying wood fungi, invertebrates and lichens on the bark. In autumn and early winter hedges offer abundant sources of food for wildlife. Ancient and wildlife-rich hedgerows can play an important role in creating links for wildlife across the landscape, making it more permeable.

The UK BAP estimated 40 per cent of hedges (95,000 miles) are ancient and or species rich. Intensification of agriculture led to hedgerow clearance: around 118,000 miles of hedgerows have disappeared since 1950. Loss slowed from the 1990s but neglect and damage remain significant threats. Lack of traditional management such as coppicing or laying has led to hedges growing tall or becoming gappy. This has been partly addressed through incentives for positive management. Traditional pollards in hedges have lapsed or have been removed without replacement for firewood. Increased stocking rates, excessive flailing and cutting of hedges down to a metre or so in height, and use of agricultural pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers right up to the base of hedgerows has led to physical damage, loss of species and nutrient enrichment.

In 1992 a Hedgerow Incentive Scheme (HIS) was introduced to fund replacement and restoration of hedgerows if they were long established landscape features, important wildlife habitats, or occurred on degraded landscapes or were of particular amenity value. Agri-environment grants in many parts of the UK support the restoration and management of hedgerows.

The 1997 Hedgerow Regulations in England and Wales aim to protect hedgerows more than 20 metres in length and/or forming part of a longer stretch of hedgerow, especially hedgerows of archaeological, wildlife and landscape importance. Removal of hedgerows is generally prohibited although in certain circumstances local authorities may issue a 'removal notice'. There is currently no such protection for hedges in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The trees within hedges are not protected from removal or inappropriate cutting.

The Woodland Trust believes hedgerows should be protected and conserved, particularly those that contain ancient woodland features or ancient trees. A new hedge cannot replace an ancient hedgerow and its important relict features, which cannot return once lost. Creation of new hedges can provide more wildlife benefits if part of wider action to make landscapes more permeable to wildlife, but hedgerow planting can also be a simple way of inspiring people and engaging them in environmental action e.g. in schools.

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