

MAIR TREES PLEASE

Our priorities for the 2026
Scottish Parliament election



WOODLAND
TRUST SCOTLAND

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Foreword



All the evidence shows that young people in Scotland care most about our natural environment. With more young people voting in this election, nature restoration and climate action will be key priorities.

My generation has inherited an exploited planet. We will all feel the effect of MSPs' policy decisions in the next Parliament. And the next Parliament will have so much to do.

Due to a lack of protection from deer and invasive non-native species, Scotland's rainforest remains under constant threat. Our ancient woodland is a crucial asset in the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss, hosting a variety of rare wildlife, yet so much of it is at serious risk of total loss if its recovery is neglected. Instead, it should be justly preserved, expanded, safeguarded and celebrated for its unique role.

Urban communities in this country are disproportionately affected by pollution and environmental hazards due to insufficient canopy cover. It is important to focus on establishing more tree equity in impoverished areas to combat greenspace inequality in Scotland. And on top of that, trees and nature have an incredibly important part to play in Scotland's economy, providing jobs and security for future generations.

Today's youth have the most to lose from inaction on climate change, as we will bear the brunt of its consequences. It is time for the Scottish Parliament to step up and rebuild the trust of a generation that has grown up watching the planet burn.

Emma Mitchell
Youth Council
The Woodland Trust



Introduction



If you breathe oxygen or live in a house, you need mair trees.

If you believe that everyone – and not just the well-off – should live in a beautiful, healthy and climate-resilient neighbourhood, you need mair trees.

If you want to reach Net Zero, you need mair trees.

If you want healthy rivers and reduced flood risk, you need mair trees.

If you want nature-rich and climate-resilient farms and crofts, you need mair trees.

If you want to move Scotland out of the bottom division in the World's league table for nature, you need mair trees.

We also need to become better stewards of the trees that we have, particularly the wonderful ancient woodlands that our ancestors protected but which are in decline under our watch.

There's much to celebrate from the past five years but still much to do. In asking for 'mair trees please', Woodland Trust Scotland is setting out what those entrusted with governing Scotland can do between 2026 and 2031 – and beyond – to ensure Scotland becomes a place where nature thrives for the benefit of all.

Alastair Seaman
Director
Woodland Trust Scotland



MAIR TREES PLEASE

Expand Scotland's native woodland

Adequately fund a minimum of 18,000 hectares of new woodland every year, of which over 50% should be native.

Ringfence over 50% of the Forestry Grant Scheme for native woodland creation.

Target new woodland creation on expanding and connecting existing ancient woodlands.

Require landowners to restore ancient woodland on their land to favourable condition.

Create new standalone Forestry Grant Scheme options: Riparian woodland, Montane woodland, Urban trees.

Save Scotland's rainforest

Deliver meaningful, long-term, upscaled funding and action to regenerate Scotland's rainforest.

Introduce strong, consistent incentives for active deer control.

Ban the sale of *Rhododendron ponticum*.

Fight the threats to Scotland's native woods and trees

Intervene where private landowners fail to manage deer numbers in line with national nature recovery goals.

Consult on the potential return of Eurasian lynx to Scotland.

Deliver a fully resourced National Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) Plan to ensure coordinated action.

Complete the National Register of Ancient Woodland.

Restore Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) to nature.

Require only UK/Ireland Sourced & Grown Trees.

Begin a Scottish breeding programme for dieback-resistant ash.

Tree equity in Scotland's towns and cities

Recognise tree equity as a social justice tool to help urban communities improve streets, air quality, climate resilience and wellbeing.

Support Local Authorities to deliver tree equity through planning and working with housebuilders and communities to plant trees where they are needed most.

Create a standalone Urban Woodland option in the Forestry Grant Scheme and expand existing Woods In and Around Towns grant.

Trees in the Scottish economy

Reform agricultural support so farmers and crofters can plant a range of low-density woods and single-tree options.

Ensure all public grant funding supports only UK Forestry Standard-compliant forestry as a minimum.

Reserve 25% of the Forestry Grant Scheme budget for sustainable, nature-rich commercial forestry, alongside the existing commitment of 50% allocation for native woodland creation.

Create fairer access to carbon income for tenant crofters.

Expand Scotland's native woodland

Introduction

Scotland needs more native trees and woodlands – for nature, for climate, for people and for our economy. Yet despite lots of woodland creation in the past five years, the budget tap has been switched on and off, denting confidence, while valuable woodland creation targets have been bent and broken. At Woodland Trust Scotland we want to see the next Scottish Government truly focussed on native woodland creation, building on the successes of this parliament with a sense of national purpose.

Ambitious woodland creation targets

The next Scottish Government should adequately fund a minimum of 18,000 hectares (ha) of new woodland every year. At least half of new woodland areas, amounting to at least 9,000ha every year, should be native woodland, expanding our national native woodland cover by at least 45,000ha, or an area two-and-a-half times the size of Glasgow city, during the next parliament. To deliver that will require at least half of the Forestry Grant Scheme budget to be ringfenced for this purpose. For maximum ecological benefit, native woodland creation should be targeted where possible on expanding and connecting existing ancient woodlands.

Tackling excessive pressure from deer

We recognise that planting trees can be expensive, mainly because of the need for fencing, protective tubes and labour, but it's often the only way to create new woodland. In addition to tree-planting, the next Scottish Government must set out how it will enable much more natural regeneration of native woodland by reducing herbivore grazing pressures – overgrazing by deer being the topmost barrier to natural regeneration – and letting native woodlands flourish and reproduce themselves.



Woodland creation next to ancient woodland at Kinclaven Bluebell Wood, Perthshire.

Restoring ancient woodlands

70% of Scotland's most important ancient woodlands are in poor condition. They are overgrazed, or suffering from pests and diseases, or infested with invasive non-native species. The next Scottish Government should use a combination of legislation and incentives to require landowners to restore ancient woodland on their land to a favourable condition.

Improving the Forestry Grant Scheme

The Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS) remains Scotland's most important funding mechanism for woodland creation and management. It is regularly reviewed to ensure it is delivering the environmental and economic outcomes needed for Scotland. The FGS needs to be well-funded to deliver the new woodland needed for climate, nature, people and the economy. In addition to greater funding levels, the FGS could be improved structurally to deliver the outcomes Scotland needs for woods and trees.

We are calling on the next Scottish Government to introduce new stand-alone FGS options for Riparian Woodland, Montane Woodland and Urban Trees. By creating more woods along watercourses, we can cool water, helping the threatened Atlantic salmon and other species thrive, as well as reducing soil erosion and nutrient runoff and providing corridors of habitat connectivity. With more scrubby woodland on our upland slopes, we can restore some of the lost biodiversity in our uplands, improve soils and water management. And with a specific fund for urban woodland, we can improve tree equity in Scotland's towns and cities, ensuring everyone can enjoy the benefits of tree cover wherever they live and not just in the most affluent areas.



Riparian planting along the Rottal Burn in Rottal Estate, Angus.

Save Scotland's rainforest

Introduction

Scotland has rainforest. It's a globally rare temperate rainforest habitat, full of bryophytes, lichens, mosses, plants and animals, which once covered huge swathes of Scotland's West Coast. But only 30,000ha of Scotland's rainforest remain – an area slightly bigger than Edinburgh. And what does remain is threatened – by overgrazing from deer, by invasive species like *Rhododendron ponticum* and by fragmentation.

In the 2021-2026 session of the Scottish Parliament, tremendous progress was made towards saving Scotland's rainforest. Led by local communities and the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest with the support of the Scottish Government and its agencies, the framework is in place and the work has begun to restore this precious habitat. But much more is needed to build on those successes and to restore and expand Scotland's rainforest.



Saving Scotland's
rainforest, progress
report 2025.



Oliver Ritchie WTM

Supporting Scotland's rainforest, Holyrood.

Building on early success

The next Scottish Government must deliver meaningful, long-term, upscaled funding and action to restore and expand Scotland's rainforest.

Action to tackle high deer numbers, invasive non-native species and fragmentation will all contribute directly to the restoration and expansion of Scotland's rainforest.



John MacPherson

Magnificent ancient oak tree in Glencripesdale, part of Scotland's rainforest.

Fight the threats to Scotland's native woods and trees

Introduction

Scotland's native trees and woodlands are irreplaceable natural assets. They support biodiversity, store carbon, improve air and water quality, and form a vital part of our national identity and cultural heritage. Yet they continue to face mounting threats: from deer overgrazing and invasive species to imported diseases and weak legal protection. If we are serious about halting nature loss and creating resilient ecosystems, the next Scottish Government must take strong, coordinated action to protect, restore and defend them.

Tackle overgrazing and bring deer populations to sustainable levels

Overgrazing by deer is now the single greatest threat to the survival and regeneration of Scotland's native woods. Since 1990, deer numbers have doubled to over one million, resulting in widespread damage to young trees and natural regeneration. In the last four decades alone, we have lost around 12.5% of our ancient woodland due to browsing pressure – a devastating decline that should have been prevented.



Trees regenerating behind deer fence, while overgrazing by deer prevents this on other side, Wester Ross.

The next Scottish Government must introduce strong, consistent incentives for active deer control. This is essential to allow our woods to recover naturally, without having to rely entirely on planting and costly fencing. Where private landowners fail to manage deer numbers in line with national nature recovery goals, the Scottish Government must explore additional measures to ensure action. In the longer term, it should also begin meaningful consultation on the potential return of the native Eurasian lynx to Scotland – a keystone species whose reintroduction could help rebalance our ecosystems, in partnership with farmers and crofters.

Combat invasive species and imported threats to tree health

Our native woods face increasing pressure from invasive non-native species (INNS) and the rising risk of imported pests and diseases. *Rhododendron ponticum* one of the most destructive invasives in Scotland, continues to be available for sale – a wholly unacceptable situation. The next Scottish Government should act decisively by banning the sale of *Rhododendron ponticum* and its use as a rootstock, ideally in collaboration with other administrations via the British-Irish Council, but unilaterally if necessary. This could be delivered through the upcoming review of the Species of Special Concern list.

More broadly, the Scottish Government must deliver a fully resourced National INNS Plan – one that sets a clear strategic vision and enables practical, coordinated action to remove and manage invasive species that threaten our native woodlands at landscape scale.

The next Scottish Government should also pursue a breeding programme for Scottish ash trees resistant to ash dieback, to ensure this iconic species is not wiped out from our landscape by this fungal disease imported from overseas.

Restore Scotland’s “Forgotten Forests”

Restoring Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) is one of the most effective ways we can recover lost biodiversity and improve woodland condition. Around half of Scotland’s PAWS sites are owned by Scottish Ministers and managed by Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS). The next Scottish Government must fund FLS to develop and deliver a clear, time-bound restoration action plan for these areas — with 80% of PAWS sites in its care in active restoration by 2030, and progress reported publicly every three years.

Restoration must also happen on privately owned PAWS sites, which make up roughly half of all PAWS sites in Scotland¹. Scottish Forestry should lead the development of a strategy and action plan to restore 50% of these sites by 2045. This should include a specific restoration grant – with a higher funding rate than for new native woodland creation – to ensure strong landowner uptake. It must also involve reforms to restocking and licensing rules to require more sensitive, restoration-led management on these special sites.

Complete the National Register of Ancient Woodland

We cannot protect what we don’t understand. That’s why the next Scottish Government must deliver on the previous commitment to create a comprehensive National Register of Ancient Woodland. This register must bring together all existing data on location and condition, creating a single, authoritative source of information about these irreplaceable habitats. Only then can we ensure effective protection and restoration in line with national biodiversity goals and planning rules.



Recording ancient and veteran trees, Edinburgh.

Introduce a Tree Protection (Scotland) Bill to secure long-term legal safeguards

Despite recent planning reforms, advances in biosecurity, public outrage at tree felling, and significant public investment in woodland creation, Scotland’s native trees remain vulnerable to a wide range of preventable threats. These range from illegal felling to development pressure to imported pests and diseases. We need a stronger legal framework to protect our native woods and trees. The next Scottish Parliament should introduce a Tree Protection (Scotland) Bill that ensures Scotland’s native trees and woodlands are the most comprehensively protected in these islands.

Such a bill could include, but not be limited to, the creation of a new “heritage status” for ancient and veteran trees, new criminal offences for harming or destroying significant trees, stronger penalties for perpetrators of harm, and modernisation of the Tree Protection Order (TPO) regime. Woodland Trust Scotland is ready to work with any government, party or MSP prepared to engage with the kinds of legal safeguards needed to match our environmental ambition with meaningful action.

Strengthen biosecurity in the tree supply chain

Once introduced, pests and diseases are extremely difficult or impossible to eradicate. Prevention is the only effective strategy. The next Scottish Government must commit to strengthening biosecurity by ensuring that all publicly funded planting – including that delivered by FLS, Scottish Forestry and NatureScot – sources trees that meet UK & Ireland Sourced and Grown (UKISG) standards. Pests and diseases do not respect national borders, so it should also advocate for a joint commitment to UKISG across the British-Irish Council, to protect woodland health throughout these islands.

Tree equity in Scotland's towns and cities

Introduction

Trees play an important role in ensuring our urban areas are healthy, attractive places for people to live and work. Tree Equity is the principle that everyone, irrespective of background or circumstances, should have equitable access to the benefits of trees – not just affluent areas. In so many of Scotland's towns and cities, people living in the areas of highest deprivation cannot as easily enjoy the many benefits of trees that people living in more affluent areas experience.

Supporting the introduction of more trees in urban areas

The next Scottish Government must recognise Tree Equity as a transformative tool for promoting social justice, empowering urban communities to improve their streets, clean up their air quality, increase their resilience to climate change and enjoy the many benefits that urban trees bring. It should also support local government to deliver tree equity, building it into local plans, working with house builders, and working with communities to plant trees where they are most needed.

The next Scottish Government should introduce a standalone Urban Tree option under the Forestry Grant Scheme, and explore whether the existing Woods In and Around Towns (WIAT) support can be reviewed and expanded.



Trees for all,
Scotland's tree equity
action plan summary
2025-30.



Westmorland Street, Tree Equity Score 76,
Govanhill, Glasgow.



Glencairn Drive, Tree Equity Score 100,
Pollokshields, Glasgow.

Trees in the Scottish economy

Introduction

Scotland's trees are central to a thriving, sustainable rural economy - supporting farming, forestry, and future green income streams. But to fully realise this potential, the next Scottish Government must take bold steps to embed trees more deeply into our land use systems, ensuring farmers, crofters, and rural businesses can benefit from the environmental and economic value trees provide.

Support for low-density tree planting on farms and crofts

Farmers and crofters across Scotland frequently express a desire to plant more trees: hedgerows, field and boundary trees, copses, shelterbelts, orchards, and other forms of agroforestry, not as large-scale forest blocks, but as part of their working land. These low-density planting systems bring multiple benefits: they improve biodiversity, enhance soil health, provide shelter and shade for livestock, and contribute to climate resilience. These approaches are however usually excluded from existing grant schemes, making it difficult for land managers to turn good intentions into action.

The next Scottish Government must reform agricultural support to include a broader range of low-density tree planting options. These options should be embedded within the new post-EU farm payment system and designed to maximise uptake, offered through non-competitive mechanisms that make them truly accessible.

Proposals developed by Woodland Trust Scotland and the Soil Association have already gained support from the Scottish Crofting Federation and National Farmers Union Scotland (NFUS), signalling a clear appetite across the sector. This is a cost-effective and widely supported way to deliver more trees in the landscape, where they are needed most.



Unlocking the potential for trees on farms and crofts in Scotland. Summary Report June 2024.



Woodland planting on croft in Lochport, North Uist.

Towards a nature-positive forestry sector

Scotland's commercial forestry industry plays a key role in our economy, particularly in rural communities. It supplies vital domestic timber, supports thousands of jobs and sustains the nursery sector that underpins future woodland creation. In recent years, the industry has made important progress, shifting away from the dominance of postwar Sitka spruce monocultures and embracing higher standards through the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS) and voluntary UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS). Yet the sector has the potential to do more: to deliver greater biodiversity, contribute to net zero and bring benefits to local communities as well as to markets.

The next Scottish Government must ensure that all public grant funding supports only UKFS-compliant forestry. But we must go further, using funding to actively promote nature-positive forestry. We call for the remaining Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS) budget to be reserved for sustainable, nature-rich approaches, alongside the existing commitment to allocate at least 50% to native woodland creation. This will help drive innovation, diversify forestry outcomes, and support a sector that works for both the economy and the environment.

Fairer access to carbon revenue for tenant crofters

As carbon markets grow, they offer an opportunity for landowners to generate revenue through native woodland creation and peatland restoration. However tenant crofters – often working in challenging conditions and playing a vital role in stewarding Scotland's uplands – are currently at a disadvantage when it comes to negotiating the share of income from projects.

Landlords generally retain control over carbon rights under landlord-led projects because current legislation allows them to apply to the Scottish Land Court which adjudicates the situation and compensation for crofters.

However crofter-led ventures have no such legal framework, there are no standard agreements, and a power imbalance between crofters and landlords means crofters can be at a disadvantage. This imbalance is fundamentally at odds with the principles of a Just Transition and undermines the ambitions set out in the Scottish Government's National Development Plan for Crofting.

The next Scottish Government must develop a fairer and more inclusive carbon economy so crofters have equitable access to benefit from opportunities from Carbon Code schemes. This includes a mechanism that would ensure crofter-led projects are entitled to a fairer share of benefits, reshaping the power imbalance between landlord led projects and crofter-led projects.

To create a fairer and more inclusive carbon economy, the next Scottish Government must develop clear mechanisms to enable crofters to participate in Carbon Code schemes. This includes allowing greater flexibility for tenant crofters to use their land for environmentally beneficial projects and ensuring that common grazings are reformed to accommodate crofter-led and joint-venture environmental initiatives. Supporting crofters to access carbon revenue is not only a matter of fairness; it is essential to realising the full potential of nature restoration in the crofting counties.

Mair questions?

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