

A Statement on Woodland Restoration and Expansion in the Brecon Beacons National Park

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The Issue

Atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations are too high and are increasing and the natural world is collapsing, all as a consequence of human activity. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report¹ (August 2019), coupled with the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services report² (May 2019) each advise that we must act now and achieve transformative change to limit annual average global temperature increases to within 1.5°C of 1990 levels, and to reverse the alarming decline in global biodiversity during this Anthropocene extinction event. We agree with the IPCC priorities: first, to reduce emissions; second, to halt the loss of existing habitat and restore where possible; and third, afforestation and habitat creation. We agree with the IPBES analysis that land-use change has had the largest negative impact on nature since 1970, followed by the overexploitation of animals, plants and other organisms mainly via harvesting, logging, hunting and fishing and that transformative actions are required to reverse these impacts.

The Welsh Government's Woodlands for Wales Strategy (2018) aims to increase woodland cover in Wales by at least 2000 hectares per year between 2020 to 2030 and for tree cover to increase in the wider countryside and in and around towns and cities. The Park's Nature Recovery Action Plan, "*A Future with Nature at its Heart*,"³ promotes the approach of 'more, bigger, better and more joined up' places for nature. It provides a response mechanism for this, led by the Local Nature Partnership. Among several priorities, the woodland focus therein is to "*develop a project surrounding the safeguarding of ancient woodland, ancient trees, wood pasture, ffridd/coed-cae and parkland, to include their management, restoration, renewal and expansion. Also to determine their extent and quality, and to seek capital works funding.*"

The evidence

The Brecon Beacons National Park is sparsely wooded, reflecting a history of human exploitation of formerly wooded areas for timber, agriculture, other wood fibre and fuel. Today, just under 14% of the Park (18,484.37 ha) supports woodland or commercial forest plantations (**Appendix I Table I**). Of this, just under 5% of the Park (6411.91 ha) is semi-natural broadleaved woodland or mixed woodland, including planted mixed woodland. Most of the Park's deciduous woodland is in small fragments, is owned privately and most is not managed actively or with biodiversity conservation and nature recovery in mind. There are, however, four woodland Special Areas of Conservation, numerous woodland Sites of Special Scientific Interest, several woodland nature reserves owned and managed by Natural Resources Wales, the National Trust Wales, the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales, The Woodland Trust and the National Park Authority and a small but growing number of community-managed woodlands. Historically, Coed Cymru provided an advisory service to the owners of the Park's small woodlands. The Local Development Plan includes policies for supporting new community woodlands and orchards within a development, supplementary planning guidance has been published⁴ on the biodiversity assets including woodland in and around the Park's key settlements, and local planning authorities are required to encourage the

¹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/srccl/>

² <https://www.ipbes.net/global-assessment-report-biodiversity-ecosystem-services>

³ <https://www.beacons-npa.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/BBNPA-Nature-Recovery-A4-ENG-WEB.pdf>

⁴ Biodiversity in the Towns of the National Park <https://www.beacons-npa.gov.uk/planning/draft-strategy-and-policy/supplementary-planning-guidance/>

management of features such as small woodlands that are essential for the migration, dispersal and genetic exchange of wild species⁵.

The many benefits that healthy and expansive woodland provides, where it is already rich in biodiversity, include:

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| CO ₂ sequestration | Water quality improvement |
| Rich and varied nature | Soil conservation |
| Healthy carbon and oxygen cycles | Flood amelioration |
| Nutrient recycling | Landscape screening |
| Dust suppression | Landscape connectivity |
| Pollution control | Wood fibre and fuel |
| Atmospheric cooling | Socio-economic benefits |
| Water infiltration into the landscape | Human health and well-being. |

Our analysis

Together with soil and peatland conservation and restoration, increasing woodland cover and wood pasture are proven means of mitigating the release of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) and locking up atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂)⁶. Additionally, woodland restoration and expansion are simple to understand and therefore popular. Where objectives are well defined and schemes well designed and implemented, woodland restoration and expansion benefits nature and provides opportunities for people to get involved directly, improving their health and well-being. We recognise that potentially, the Brecon Beacons National Park and its people provide ample opportunities to expand existing woodland by encouraging natural regeneration, woodland planting and relevant community and co-operative actions. Any methods must be caveated by intelligence to avoid a proliferation of plastic waste (tree guards), awareness that the Park’s small populations of red and fallow deer will expand, controlling invasive and non-native species and living with risks to native tree species from diseases, pests and pathogens now seen in larch die back, oak processionary moth, ash die back and others. Woodland restoration and expansion must always be achieved in ways that complement the distribution, recovery and expansion of other habitats, conservation of the historic environment and that are sensitive to the need to continue to produce food in local and regional supply chains.

The sparse and fragmented extent of the Park’s woodlands mean that their contribution as a carbon sink to mitigate GHG emissions is likely to be small. Fragmentation also suppresses woodlands’ ecological diversity and wildlife richness. To achieve noticeable benefits requires a significant and sustained, multi-decadal effort to restore woodland (**Appendix I**), especially broadleaf woodland, connect between woodlands and remove the pressures on existing woodlands, whilst complementing the restoration of other habitats and the conservation of the historic environment.

Historically, wooded areas were cleared to facilitate hunting and pasture expansion. Woodlands as we understand them today were enclosed deliberately from more open wood pasture landscapes and planted and managed to provide timber (building, ship building, other uses), charcoal and wood fuel. We must restore, conserve and enhance these enclosed ancient semi-natural woodlands but ecologically, unenclosed areas of scrub, wood pasture, parkland and ‘forest’ (i.e., open areas of wood, scrub and grassland), with appropriate grazing – e.g., cattle, which are natural forest animals - might be more beneficial and this will be more beneficial for landscape enrichment too. So we will be supportive of a range of woodland types on floodplains and valley sides, as well as retaining and bolstering the mature and veteran/ancient trees present

⁵ Article 10 of the EC Habitats Directive 1992.

⁶ <https://woodlandcarboncode.org.uk/>

already. We will support woodland expansion that is ecologically and bio-geographically intelligent, retaining and encouraging the recovery of other habitats too.

There are sufficient data, understanding and knowledge to design a woodland regeneration plan for the Park, and there is an appetite to seek capital and revenue funding to implement this. The key to success is to achieve cross-sector consensus for concerted and sustained, decadal action, and to deliver on this basis.

Appendix I outlines some estimated costs and scope.

Actions needed to effectively increase the extent and ecological quality of the Park's deciduous woodland

We need a strong woodland partnership to lead on woodland restoration and expansion and to build on and extend beyond the progress made through the woodland agri-environment incentives to date (Woodland Grant Scheme, Better Woodlands for Wales, and the several Glastir Woodland grants). The natural lead partners are Natural Resources Wales, The National Trust, Farming Connect, Coed Cadw, Coed Cymru, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, the Wye and Usk Foundation, the Vincent Wildlife Trust, the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales, Gwent Wildlife Trust, universities and willing private landowners; underpinned by a real intent by Welsh Government to improve woodland cover here. This partnership would work in collaboration with the new business advisory service sought under Sustainable Farming and Our Land.

The woodland restoration and expansion programme would aim to achieve:

Setting objectives for the 'Favourable Conservation Status'⁷ (FCS) of broadleaf woodland and soils in the Brecon Beacons National Park'

Setting objectives, a pathway and timetable to achieve woodland FCS including:

- Restoring coedcae/ffridd and altitudinal zonation of woodlands and trees
- Restoring and expanding wood pasture and parkland
- Restoring riparian woodland
- Restoring broadleaf woodland on PAWS (Planted Ancient Woodland Sites)
- Restoring wooded habitat biodiversity
- Achieving consensus for woodland regeneration on registered common land
- Recovering a more even, less erratic river discharge throughout the year
- Safeguarding the historic environment
- Achieving access and Rights of Way improvements for accessible natural greenspace including woodland
- Developing woodland cropping for timber, fibre and carbon capture
- Avoiding widespread 'coniferisation' on land released from agriculture
- Removing inappropriate woodland and shelter belts
- Supporting community woodland initiatives, and
- Developing pilot projects and areas for the above.

⁷ <https://ieep.eu/publications/how-is-favourable-conservation-status-being-defined-across-the-eu>