LINK Parliamentary Briefing:

5 Things to Know About: Woodland

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Scottish Environment LINK

Introduction

Nature is in crisis. Human activity is driving dramatic declines in wildlife and habitats at rates never seen before, while the impacts of the climate emergency are increasing the pace of change. A significant part of our response to the twinned crisis of nature loss and climate change can come from realising the full potential of trees and woods to sequester carbon and to support wildlife-rich ecosystems. **This briefing sets out five things you need to know about trees and woodlands in Scotland.**

1) A more balanced approach for woodland creation is needed to deliver for nature and climate at the same time

Simply planting the same types of non-native trees will not deliver for nature and climate. Although commercial forestry plays an important role, to deliver the action needed urgently for nature and climate the majority of woodland expansion should be with native species. Alongside tree planting, natural regeneration needs to play more of an integral and complementary role in the expansion of our tree cover. Natural regeneration provides for a wider genetic diversity of trees, helping resilience against diseases and adapt to changing climate. These new woods should also be better managed and created strategically to fit into the landscape and deliver a wide range of benefits. Strategically planting native woods along water courses can, for example, improve water quality.

New native woodland creation should comprise at least 50% of the overall target for woodland creation, and at least 10% of this should be delivered through natural regeneration. The current native woodland cover across Scotland is around 4% of the land area. In a nature and climate emergency this is simply not good enough. Efforts must be ramped up to create more native woodlands, and woodland creation for nature must be better integrated with woodland creation for commercial use. The targets for native woodland expansion are between 3,000 and 5,000ha per year. These targets have not been reviewed since 2015 and as the overall targets for woodland creation are increasing, native woodland creation risks lagging even further behind.

2) To achieve our climate goals, we need to protect and restore our existing woods

We don't just need more woodland, we also need to improve the quality of the woods already in our landscapes. While woodland creation has ramped up in Scotland in recent years, and the Climate Change Plan update sets targets to reach 18,000ha by 2024/25, this must happen alongside looking after the ecological qualities built up over centuries in our existing trees and woods. Ancient woodland continues to disappear from our landscapes and some native woods are in poor ecological condition due to compounding threats (these are detailed at point 3 below). Scotland's existing woods have multiple benefits for our environment and society, including their value as biodiversity reserves and as long term carbon stores. In order to secure their future, existing woods need to be made more resilient through grant support for better management.

Additionally, the importance of existing woods, particularly ancient woods, must be on a par with woodland expansion, and must be recognised as part of Scotland's Climate Change Plan and action for the climate and nature emergency. A recent report has shown that ancient woodland in Scotland holds on average 30% more carbon compared to the average carbon stores for other woodland types, even

though ancient woodland covers less than 2% of land area.[1] Further, over the next 100 years stocks of carbon in ancient woods are set to increase.

3) Overgrazing and invasive non-native species are two of the main threats to woodland expansion and restoration

The Native Woodland Survey for Scotland (NWSS) conducted between 2006 and 2013 assessed that more than half of our native woodlands are in poor condition. This is largely because of two compounding threats: overgrazing, mainly by deer, and invasive non-native species, mainly *rhododendron ponticum*. Rhododendron can colonise the woodlands, shading out woodland flora, and it can outcompete native trees. Overgrazing poses a risk to the biodiversity value and long-term survival of woods, because it prevents young trees from establishing, so when the older trees die, there is nothing to replace them and we lack the habitat diversity that younger trees bring to a native wood.

To bring deer management into the 21st century and align this with action for nature and climate, including woodland expansion, restoration and protection, the accepted Deer Working Group recommendations must be implemented urgently. Current support for rhododendron clearance must also be revised to take a long-term approach to deal with both the invasive and persistent nature of the plant and to bring together community-based alliances to tackle the problem.

4) Restore and expand Scotland's rainforest, a globally rare habitat on the west coast

Scotland's rainforest is an internationally important habitat of ancient and native woodland with open glades, ravines and river gorges, found on the west coast. This kind of rainforest is found in other parts of Europe, but Scotland has the highest quality and quantity. These woodlands provide a refuge for some of the world's rarest bryophytes and lichens, some of which are found only in Scotland, and this makes Scotland's rainforest internationally important. This habitat is under threat due to inappropriate levels of grazing, invasive *rhododendron ponticum* and plantation forestry, as well as tree disease, atmospheric nitrogen deposition and climate change.

Restoring and expanding the rainforest must be part of Scotland's response to the nature and climate emergency. To give the rainforest the best chance to adapt, thrive and gain resilience to climate change, rainforest habitat must be expanded and the threats to it must be addressed. **The future of Scotland's rainforest must be ensured through:**

- Addressing impacts cause by high deer numbers
- Removing invasive *rhododendron ponticum* and ensuring re-invasion is prevented
- Prioritising this habitat in Scotland's next biodiversity strategy

Expansion of Scotland's rainforest would also create additional new woodland areas, through tree planting and natural regeneration where possible, thus creating new carbon stores and expanding the range available to many species. The rainforest habitat holds significant heritage importance for local people who have shaped and worked in these woods over thousands of years, and presents many opportunities for Scotland, from tourism potential to jobs in management and restoration, and outdoor learning and education. Many LINK members are also part of the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest and working towards a vision to see the rainforest thrive once again.

[1] https://forestry.gov.scot/forests-environment/biodiversity/native-woodlands/native-woodland-survey-of-scotland-nwss

5) Green recovery: investing in the future of our woods

Forestry is a highly significant sector of activity in Scotland's economy, supporting many direct and indirect jobs - from nurseries where trees are grown from seed, to tree planting, woodland management, and the visitor economy. There is scope for our forests and woodlands to support many more jobs as part of a Green Recovery from Covid-19, in which high quality jobs can be part of supporting biodiversity and carbon sequestration. For example, supporting trees to be sourced and grown in the UK means that the biosecurity risks associated with importing trees are minimised, international freight miles reduced and more jobs can be created in the nursery sector in the UK.

An RSPB Scotland, WWF Scotland and Scottish Wildlife Trust briefing on the role of nature recovery in green recovery identifies woodland creation and restoration, and sustainable deer management, as two areas that will deliver nature-based jobs and should be invested in as part of Scotland's green recovery from Covid-19. Many of these jobs will be in rural areas and benefit local people and communities.

Helpful terms:

Woodland creation – in this briefing the term 'woodland creation' is used to include 'tree planting' and 'natural regeneration.'

Native trees – Native trees colonised the land when the glaciers melted after the last Ice Age and before the UK was disconnected from mainland Europe.

Ancient woodland – in Scotland these woods are defined as woods that have existed for many hundreds of years, with map evidence existing from the 1750s.

Natural regeneration – this happens when trees self-seed and spread themselves. It provides a variety of habitat structures, supports woodland resilience, can reduce the reliance on tree imports and nursery stocks and can be cheaper than tree planting.

This response is supported by the following LINK member organisations:

National Trust for Scotland
Plantlife Scotland
RSPB Scotland
Ramblers Scotland
Scottish Wildlife Trust
Trees for Life
Woodland Trust Scotland

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 40 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

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