Woodland Creation in Wales – context and principles

May 2014

Wales Environment Link (WEL) is a network of environmental and countryside Non-Governmental Organisations in Wales, most of whom have an all-Wales remit. WEL is officially designated the intermediary body between the government and the environmental NGO sector in Wales. Its vision is to increase the effectiveness of the environmental sector in its ability to protect and improve the environment through facilitating and articulating the voice of the sector.

Policy Context

WEL believes that there is a need to reverse the fragmentation and declining diversity of woodland habitats to meet Wales Biodiversity targets. This could be achieved by setting the long-term goal of doubling native woodland cover[1], and include the targeted management and restoration of existing native woodland and newly created woodlands, for priority habitats and species.

WEL also recognises the recommendations of the Land Use and Climate Change sub-group to create 100,000 ha of new woodland by 2030, as an important element in Welsh Government's plan to adapt to climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the land management sector. There is much evidence to reinforce this aspiration – a clear need for more woodland was also a key recommendation of the Read Report on the role of UK forests in combating climate change[2] and the UK National Ecosystem Assessment[3] notes as a key finding that "The expansion of Woodlands has contributed to both improved climate regulation, through greater carbon sequestration, and air quality, while at the same time increased timber supply" (p.23)[4].

It is crucial however, that woodland creation on this kind of scale is delivered sensitively, with the right tree in the right place. This paper sets out principles for woodland creation, which we believe Welsh Government should adopt and promote in order to ensure that woodland creation secures multiple wins for the environment and people of Wales. If sustainably managed, Wales' woodland and trees offer huge benefits in terms of biodiversity, public access and recreation, public health, landscape quality, and ecosystem services such as flood mitigation, soil and carbon management, as well as a sustainable supply of a timber and wood products. This diversity of objectives and benefits is recognised in the Welsh Government's Woodland Strategy[5].

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[1] Wales Environment Link (2011). Wales Environment Link Manifesto: Policy Priorities for Wales 2011-15. p.15
http://www.waleslink.org/manifesto

[2] Read, D.J., Freer-Smith, P.H., Morison, J.I.L., Hanley, N., West, C.C. and Snowdon, P. (eds). (2009.) Combating climate change – a role for UK forests. An assessment of the potential of the UK's trees and woodlands to mitigate and adapt to climate change. The synthesis report. The Stationery Office, Edinburgh. http://www.forestry.gov.uk/readreport

[3] UK National Ecosystem Assessment (2011) The UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Synthesis of the Key Findings. UNEP-WCMC, Cambridge. http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/Resources/tabid/82/Default.aspx

[4] UK National Ecosystem Assessment (2011) The UK National Ecosystem Assessment Technical Report, Chapter 8: Woodlands. UNEP-WCMC, Cambridge. http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/Resources/tabid/82/Default.aspx

[5] Welsh Assembly Government (2009). Woodland for Wales: the Welsh Assembly Government's Strategy for Woodland and Trees. p.62http://wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/forestry/woodlandsforwales/wfwstrategyforwoodlandstrees/;jsessionid=EB82FDC4859CD20A318A9D3955168324?lang=en

As part of the aspiration for woodland creation, Welsh Government also needs to succeed in meeting Wales' Biodiversity targets and other EU obligations. WEL and its constituent members are keen to work with Government, statutory bodies and other stakeholders to discuss the innovative measures and practical mechanisms that need to be considered when planning how to achieve these aims.

Principles

WEL calls for the Welsh Government woodland creation delivery plan[6] to adopt the following woodland creation core principles.

New woodland should:
- Deliver **multiple benefits** in an integrated way. Most native and mixed species woodland creation can deliver biodiversity benefits in addition to other purposes, provided schemes are well designed and located.
- Be designed to fit in to the **local** context, with good community engagement, and create a robust network of ecologically diverse sites and not impose uniformity nationwide.
- Incorporate structural and species **diversity**, including a high proportion of native broadleaved species as these maximise a wide range of benefits.
- Seek to maintain and increase habitat **connectivity**, build local distinctiveness and promote natural biodiversity processes and resilience.
- Be created substantially by **natural** regeneration where appropriate or where nature conservation objectives necessitate. Under other circumstances including farm planting, urban schemes, community engagement and timber production, planting will be necessary to ensure objectives are met.
- Be **sustainably integrated** with the needs of modern **farming**, helping to create resilience at both the farm, forest and landscape level.
- Whenever possible be located and designed to contribute to **flood control and water quality** improvement.
- Recognise the high value of enhanced tree cover in **urban** areas.
- Whenever possible enhance **recreational experience** by providing new accessible woodland in a more diverse and robust landscape, and using local community contacts in its planning and design.
- Include areas of **partial tree cover**, for example wood pasture, an important and traditional feature of the Welsh landscape and a valuable habitat in its own right. Increasing tree cover on land to ≥20% should count as new woodland.
- **Not principally consist of forestry plantations** but should create a generally higher tree cover in the landscape through extensive but **small scale planting**, including hedges, tree belts, riparian strips, small copses and field trees. Initiatives should maintain sufficient green infrastructure to satisfy requirements of widely distributed species, enhance and buffer existing habitats, and as far as possible work with local people in the planting to engender a sense of community ownership.
- **Not cause damage** in other ways, for example loss of priority habitat/ species at a landscape/ population level, acidification of rivers or the loss of recreational access.

Next steps

As outlined in WEL's response to the Welsh Government consultation on Proposals for the Glastir scheme as part of the RDP 2014-20[7] we are calling on Welsh Government to use specific mechanisms available within the agri-environment scheme to improve woodland creation in Wales.

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[6] Forestry Commission Wales (2012) Woodland creation delivery plan – Proposed Woodland Creation Options. Unpublished Nov 2012
[7] http://www.waleslink.org/sites/default/files/WEL_Glastir_Review_response_Mar14_FINAL.pdf

These are:
- Appropriately placed wide hedges, shelterbelts, small copses and field trees to generate sheltered grazing as features to be incorporated and promoted within Glastir.
- Address the failings in the Woodland Planting Opportunities map 'traffic-light' system by further refining the mapping process and supporting the overall assessment process with a properly resourced advisory service to ensure that woodland creation is appropriate and delivers maximum environmental benefits.

WEL wants to work with Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales and other interested stakeholders to develop a cohesive, workable and environmentally sound approach to woodland creation in Wales.

We advocate a creative approach to increasing Wales' woodlands, which would employ widespread but strategic initiatives across a range of locations – from natural colonisation in the uplands to small scale planting on farmland and green infrastructure in our cities. We want to help generate an innovative and joined up approach to woodland creation in Wales that will deliver positive and sustainable outcomes for the environment, economy and society as a whole.

The following WEL members support this document:

Afonydd Cymru

Bat Conservation Trust

Butterfly Conservation Wales

Campaign for National Parks

Coed Cadw / Woodland Trust

Glandŵr Cymru – the Canal & River Trust in Wales

Llais y Goedwig

Plantlife Cymru

Ramblers Cymru

RSPB Cymru

Salmon & Trout Association

Vincent Wildlife Trust

Wildlife Trusts Wales

YHA Wales

Ymddiriedolaeth Genedlaethol / National Trust