WILDLIFE AND WILD SPACES

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The Forest of Dean is of national and international importance for wildlife. The Forest is a stronghold, and even a last refuge, for individual species and the range of species that are supported through the diverse blend of differing habitats that have resulted from its geology and industrial heritage.

The Dean has never been entirely wooded. There has always been a matrix of open habitat such as heathland, grassland, unimproved pastures and wetlands that linked to the underlying geology, and topography – but also evolved and declined according to man's activities. In general terms, the more sustained and intensive man's interventions have been, the more long-lived and species-rich the open habitat has become. Broadly, this has been because, left undisturbed, those open habitats will naturally scrub up and become wooded. Much of the specialised, site-specific species of plants, animals and insects have taken advantage of habitats that are not stable, and are in transition. This results in a constant ebb and flow of nature, of wildlife moving around the wild spaces within the Forest.

Since the decimation in sheep numbers after the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001, many open habitats that had been kept open by sheep grazing have scrubbed up. Today when we have arguably more trees and, correspondingly, less open space in the Forest than ever before.

Over-grazing by deer, repeated damage by boar, predation from grey squirrels, and the spread of non-native species such as Himalayan balsam, are also having long-term negative impacts on our native wildlife.

Outside the statutory Forest, agricultural intensification and development has led to widespread and permanent loss of semi-natural open habitats. Now, they only exist as isolated islands of designated or protected sites within a wider matrix of agriculturally improved land, with few opportunities to reconnect them. The net result is a reduction of natural open habitats within the wider landscape, and a reduction in site functionality due to isolation.

Wildlife conservation activity over the past decade has focused on restoring open habitat, with some 580 hectares of the public forest estate in the Forest of Dean now managed as permanent open space.

Species conservation is often the driver behind these initiatives, and projects such "Linking the Pearls" and Upper Wye Gorge SSSI management have focused on restoring small pearl bordered butterfly habitat and endemic whitebeams – species that are on the brink of local extinction and require urgent interventions to save them.

The geology and topography of the Dean dictate, and have in turn been influenced by, the way water moves through the Forest landscape. Despite the massive impacts of mining, industry and surface drainage for woodland plantations over the last two centuries, there remains a remarkable degree of linkage between the headwater streams and the tidal rivers of the Severn and Wye. Although much degraded, the potential for restoration of riverine, wetland and mire habitats, and the resultant positive impacts on associated species of plants, animals and insects is huge.

In summary, the Forest of Dean is a nationally and internationally important landscape for nature. The intrinsic value of that nature comes from the intimate and diverse relationship between individual trees and woodlands, linkages with open spaces and grazing animals, and the relics left by our industry. While what we have is great, we can't escape from the fact that the Forest under-performs and has been in decline for many decades from a nature conservation perspective. The additional threats from climate change, and the increased pace of change in the wider environment, require a revitalised, landscape-scale approach focusing on the Lawton principles of bigger, better and more joined up.

WHERE DO WE WANT TO GET TO?

In 100 years time the Forest will be justifiably known as one of the top locations to see a vibrant, diverse, yet wild landscape where natural processes support a productive and species rich Forest.

Each habitat will be of a sufficient size and scale to self-perpetuate through natural processes, where man's interventions are few and far between. The landscape will be dynamic, and habitats will naturally evolve as they respond to differing conditions. The landscape will be permeable, with high degrees of connectivity so that species can readily move to new sites as those habitats naturally transition.

The Forest's watercourses and wetlands will enjoy functional connectivity between upland bogs and headwater streams to the tidal rivers. Ponds and lakes will have an ecological function, as well an aesthetic and storm water storage one.

Grazing animals will play an important role in maintaining those open habitats, both domestic stock and wild. Iconic species, and the ability to see them, will be supporting a renewed engagement between people and the wildlife around them.

Diverse woodland structures, coppice, high forest, pasture woodland and increased numbers of veteran trees of different species will form a varied wooded structure, providing shelter and security. The vibrant woodlands will act to mitigate extremes of rainfall and temperature for wildlife and people.

Woodland design and structure will act to minimise, or contain, fire risk during increased periods of intense drought and high temperatures, providing increased protection and resilience of the wildlife and wild spaces.

Management of the Forest's built heritage, mines and quarries, will recognise the intrinsic values of those man-made structures for wildlife conservation.

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?

Our commitments:

1 Identify habitats of current and potential conservation importance, to ensure they are made bigger, better and more joined up

2 Reduce the spread and impact of invasive species

3 Improve habitats through the development and care of our woodlands

4 Utilise open spaces for nature conservation by developing grazing systems

5 Use species reintroduction to deliver positive changes to the environment

6 Manage and monitor Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI)

1 Identify habitats of current and potential conservation importance, to ensure they are made bigger, better and more joined up

Our initial priority will be to complete a high level habitat mapping exercise, linked to the existing Forest of Dean Landscape Character work, to provide a landscape scale framework to link habitats in a resilient and ecologically functional manner. Landscape connectivity will be considered to ensure the habitat for the internationally important bat colonies are protected or improved.

During the Forest Planning process, this high level mapping will be refined to take into account specific sites of current and potential conservation importance, and how they will be functionally linked and ecologically sustained in reality. This will reflect our ambition for bigger habitat units, where ecological functions / natural processes are sustained with only minimal intervention by man.

2 Reduce the spread and impact of invasive species

There is a range of invasive species that are of long-term conservation concern for the Forest of Dean. These include, but are not limited to, feral wild boar, deer (notably muntjac) and grey squirrels, as well as plant species such as Himalayan Balsaam, Giant Hogweed and Japanese Knotweed. We will further develop strategies and interventions to reduce the spread and impact of these species, noting that the presence of these species at low densities may be beneficial to delivery of our long-term objectives.

3 Improve habitats through the development and care of our woodlands

We will diversify woodland structure, taking a site by site approach to decision making to determine appropriate silvicultural systems and individual interventions. In this way, we will maximise age class diversity, species diversity, manipulation of light levels (impacting on ground flora and regeneration) and maximise local character. This will include identification

of non-intervention, old growth, and coppice woodlands, for example. Our objective will be to move away from the clearfell / restock system. Attention to woodland edge management will be increased to improve habitat (and aesthetic) values.

4 Utilise open spaces for nature conservation by developing grazing systems

Historically, many of the open spaces in wooded environments have been both created and maintained naturally by grazing animals. To manage open spaces in an optimal way for nature conservation, we need to develop grazing systems appropriate to the size, scale and nature of the habitats we plan. Our challenge is to do this in a way that supports the cultural heritage of free roaming sheep, whilst focusing grazing in the areas required – that may change over time, and in a way that reduces the need for intrusive fencing. We recognise that different animals graze in different ways, and thus a blend of hardy stock will be required.

5 Use species reintroduction to deliver positive changes to the environment

The ecological richness of the Forest has declined over the last few decades, and some species are at risk of extinction from the Forest. Some species, such as beaver and pine marten, have been identified as animal species that can be used to deliver positive change to the environment. Beavers are natural water engineers, and can fundamentally change man-made water courses and drained valleys in a short space of time. There is scope to consider further use of inclosed populations of beavers and, in time perhaps, potential to remove the fences and let beavers naturally recolonise the catchments. Pine marten have the potential to impact grey squirrel populations and lower the density of squirrels, which will reduce damage to trees and predation of other species. Other species of plants, insects and animals may be considered for reintroduction to play a beneficial role in the environment, to add to the species diversity, or reinforce a declining species. In all cases, proposed reintroductions will be carefully assessed to ensure we don't create an ecological or social problem, and to ensure the introduction has a good chance of success.

6 Manage and monitor Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI)

The existing network of Sites of Special Scientific Interest will continue to be managed in accordance with the approved plans to retain or achieve 'favourable condition' status. Where appropriate, Forest Plans will look to extend or buffer SSSI sites with habitat of a similar or supporting nature in line with the Lawton principles of bigger, better and more joined up.

These are our principles of land management to celebrate our wildlife and safeguard our wild spaces.