

## PE1812/B

Help Trees Help Us submission of 14 September 2020

The Woodland Trust has registered 274 ancient woodlands currently under threat in Scotland. The Trust admits the true figure will be higher. We understand the Trust is the only organisation that collects and holds this information, which is gathered by volunteers who review local authority planning portals looking for applications that impact ancient woodland.

Scotland's local newspapers carry stories weekly of illegal and legal felling in ancient, native and broadleaved woodlands that result in fines and/or negative impacts on the local communities, biodiversity and wildlife. HTHU has been contacted by numerous individuals desperate to protect and preserve local woods precious to them.

RSPB, Scottish Wildlife Trust and WWF Scotland have launched a Nature Recovery Plan for Scotland with an 11 point plan of action. Number 1 is to protect and expand Scotland's native woodlands as last year's State of Nature in Scotland Report declared 49% of our species have declined and one in nine is threatened with national extinction.

Disease is wiping out our native ash & larch trees and elm trees are already all but gone. Experts estimate Scotland will lose up to 90% of its ash trees in a few decades. Ash is a widespread and fundamental presence in our native woodlands and according to GOV.UK is associated with 955 species, 45 of which are only found on ash trees. Thousands of hectares of diseased larch trees have been felled.

According to DEFRA's UK Risk Register our trees are currently threatened by 127 high-risk pests and diseases, the warming climate and movement of trees and plants around the world.

According to one local authority, Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) are onerous but afford little additional protection. TPOs can be overruled by planning committees, local records of TPOs are at best incomplete and land owners often do not know they have trees with TPOs on their land.

Fires, legal and illegal logging, development, mining, climate change and other threats ensure that old growth woodland worldwide continues to disappear at an eye-watering rate. WWF is urging the European Commission to create and fund an ambitious forest ecosystem restoration plan by 2021.

We are scunnered the official Government response ignored most issues we raised in our petition documents. The response makes:

- no mention of woodland floor and the urgent need to ensure woods are able to naturally regenerate and continue to provide a diverse range of habitats;
- no attempt to address the issue of ancient and native woods in private ownership that have no statutory designation or formal protection and that according to the Scottish Government's own reports are often threatened by neglect, misuse, lack of regeneration and lack of protection;
- no acknowledgement that out-of-date legislation no longer protects our native flowers (like bluebells) from current and emerging threats;
- no recognition that most people do not know where ancient/native woods are and why there is such a desperate need to respect and protect them;

- no reference to the nature services our woods provide us, especially in relation to both our and Earth's health & wellbeing and capturing and storing carbon; and
- there are vast and growing gaps in the Government's knowledge and influence at community level (as indicated by the Woodland Trust's efforts to capture data about threats to woodlands from volunteers). Multiple Governmental 'strong presumptions', guidelines, plans and strategies are merely creating a confused and over-complicated landscape with many cracks for people to misunderstand and misuse, and for our precious ancient/native woods and biodiversity to continue to gradually slip through our fingers and disappear forever.

The Government response was largely focussed on commercial forestry and, like almost all forestry guidelines, strategies, codes and policies, these are not enforceable law.

If our own local council's Forestry and Woodland Strategy was implemented it is unlikely we would have needed to lodge the petition.

The Government response states new tracks in woods may require planning permission, but our planning authority insists this is not necessary if the tracks are of mud and timber construction and have the landowner's permission. The Council stated it has no powers to protect the ancient bluebell wood on the basis of its biodiversity, in spite of the track being constructed during the peak breeding season for birds and other animals.

Sir David Attenborough's programme EXTINCTION: THE FACTS, broadcast on Sunday 13 September, laid bare the chasm between political promises to protect our Earth and the hellish stark reality for most other species and many poorer peoples of the world. There will be horrific consequences for future generations. They would ask us to PLEASE stop tinkering while home burns and have the courage now to take the actions so critically needed to shift us from being exploiters of Earth to guardians of this lonely glittering gem of a planet that gave us our lives and everything we have.