

PE1812/C

Woodland Trust in Scotland submission on 16 September 2020

Briefing in relation to *PE1812: Protect Scotland's remaining ancient, native and semi-native woodlands and woodland floors*

You will be considering this petition at the committee on the 17th September 2020. The petition raises issues which the Woodland Trust has been advocating for many years now: ancient woodland does not have enough protection from development in the current planning system, or protection from other threats such as overgrazing, and this irreplaceable habitat continues to get fragmented and chipped away at.

What is ancient woodland and why is it irreplaceable

Ancient woodland is woodland that has been around for many hundreds of years. The mapping evidence used to document the location and antiquity of woodland is available on various map sources such as Ordnance Survey maps and Roy military survey maps. These became reasonably accurate around 1750. The map sources used show where areas have been continuously wooded or have had a short break continuity of woodland cover.

Ancient woodland is considered irreplaceable because it cannot be recreated. It has unique and complex communities of plants, fungi, insects and other microorganisms that have formed in specific conditions over a long period of time. Ancient woodland is not just about trees, but the whole habitat is important including the soils, plants, fungi, insects which have developed and operate in harmony to create one of the most biodiverse habitats. These areas are also important carbon stores and some of our most biodiverse habitats.

Identifying ancient woodland is challenging with the current Ancient Woodland Inventory

In Scotland some ancient woodland is documented on the Ancient Woodland Inventory which is held by NatureScot (formerly known as SNH). The Inventory is incomplete and in desperate need of an update to help identify and locate types of woodland. It is entirely possible that we are losing more ancient woodland than we know but not having a register of all the ancient woodland makes impossible to know where all sites are located. To comply with policies to protect ancient woodland this Inventory would need to be updated and the use of it better promoted. The Woodland Trust has been calling for an update for many years now.

How much is left and what are the threats

It is estimated that in Scotland we have around 1% of land area covered by ancient woodland. It should be entirely possible and reasonable to afford the best protection possible to the remaining areas. Ancient woodland is irreplaceable so once it's gone, it's gone.

Ancient woods have been lost or damaged due to conifer plantations, overgrazing and the spread of invasive species like rhododendron, and also from inappropriate development. As

of 1st July 2020 in Scotland we have 274 ancient woodlands currently under threat from developmet. The Woodland Trust is the only organisation that holds this kind of data because statutory nature agencies such as NatureScot do not collect this data. This information is collected through a network of volunteers who review local authority planning portals looking for applications that impact on ancient woodland. As we are a charity and not a statutory body there is no obligation for any local authority or developer to give us this information. However, some local authorities are aware of our interest in this matter and do notify us of applications impacting ancient woodland. The Trust is not a statutory body which means that these figures are likely to be lower than the reality as we are unlikely to be aware of all threats.

A large number of the sites included in the 274 is mainly as a result of several large transmission line projects in the north of Scotland. For example, the Western Isles Transmission Line will run through 54 separate areas of ancient woodland under current proposals. Just recently the Woodland Trust eagerly waited for a decision on an ancient woodland in the Cairngorms National Park which was under threat from a housing development. Thankfully the application was rejected. Planning policies should be water tight to not even allow for the possibility of developers putting in a planning application on such sites, especially in national parks. Clarifying policies to state where is allowed to develop and where the natural environment should be protected would help conservation charities like the Woodland Trust save precious resources and help provide developers clarity on where to direct their resources too.

What can be done

The petition raised by Help Trees Help us raises important points that need to be considered and addressed by the Scottish Parliament, Scottish Government and NatureScot as the statutory agency for nature. The Committee should recommend to the Scottish Government that ancient woodland needs to be afforded better protection. The next best opportunity to do this is to strengthen planning policies in the National Planning Framework 4 and to address the other threats of overgrazing and invasive species, adequate grant schemes should be made available to land managers. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rescue these remaining fragments of our natural heritage. And we need all the help we can get.