

PE1812/M

NatureScot submission of 27 November 2020

The petition specifies 'ancient, native and semi-native' woodlands, and it's perhaps worth clarifying these distinctions. 'Ancient' means that a site has been continuously wooded since they were recorded as being of semi-natural origin on either the 1750 Roy maps or the Ordnance Survey maps of 1860. A number of these woodlands were converted during the 20th Century to plantations of non-native species and are now mapped as Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS). In this response we're not addressing the management of PAWS. The terms native and semi-native refer to the origin of the tree species present. There is considerable overlap between these categories, and for simplicity we'll generally refer to these as **natural woodlands**. About 25% of Scotland's natural woodland area is designated under various nature conservation designations, especially SSSI and SAC.

Protection of natural woodlands

Overall, natural woodland is well protected against some threats, and poorly protected against others. Specifically:

- a. **Natural woodlands are well protected against felling and removal.** Whilst any loss for development is a loss of an irreplaceable resource, our best information is that these losses are a small part of the overall loss of natural woodlands on a Scotland scale. More recently the protection from removal by felling has been strengthened as described in the Scottish Government's submission.
- b. **Natural woodlands are poorly protected against persistent damage leading to loss of area, condition and richness.** Evidence shows that the main cause of natural woodland loss is the impact of long term high grazing levels which has resulted in a loss of about 12.5% of our ancient, semi-natural woodland by area over the last 40 years. Our monitoring of designated woodlands similarly notes that grazing impacts are a key driver of decline, and at present most of designated woodlands (>50%) are in unfavourable and declining condition – the precursor to eventual loss. Invasion by Rhododendron is also a significant driver of decline. These threats are driving a steady loss of natural woodlands, but they also have immediate impacts on woodland floors, preventing the growth, flowering and fruiting of woodland floor plant species (such as blaeberry in pinewoods). Historic and current decline also implies a substantial loss of stored carbon compared to healthy natural woodlands. The status of designated woodlands, and their priority for intervention and incentives is important, but has not been sufficient to prevent the decline and loss described – and that decline and loss is very likely to be worse in non-designated natural woodlands.
- c. **Natural woodlands are poorly protected against novel threats especially related to climate change** Wildfire is a good example of a developing threat – for which climate change is expected to substantially increase the risk in Scotland (a trend already evident already in many parts of the world). Almost none of our natural woodlands have any planning and preparation in place for this threat, although some guidance is available. There are a range of other developing threats, including other climate impacts like drought and waterlogging, and novel biotic threats of which ash dieback is the most recent example. Overall, the management and protection of our natural woodlands need to

prepare for novel threats and challenges, and effective future protection depends upon planning for greater resilience being developed and implemented urgently.

The Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI)

The Scottish AWI is a guide to the location of Ancient Woodland. As submissions on this petition have noted, it remains provisional. While its completion would be valuable in some respects, recent survey exercises, notably the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland have had a wider scope, embracing all native or nearly-native woodlands. This is a recognition that all native woodlands are important and valuable, and that given limited survey resources, our interests in natural woodlands are better served by that broader focus. It also reflects the limits of the AWI process, in that the source maps indicating ancient-ness are themselves flawed in representing woodland consistently or accurately.

The condition of woodland floors

The petitioner also mentions that the value of ancient and native woodland floors is completely unrecognised. NatureScot certainly does recognise that value. Our condition assessment of designated woodlands includes assessment of the structure, understorey condition and ground flora as part of measuring wider woodland condition. The key problem to the ground flora and understorey is the negative impact from grazing herbivores and invasive species.

The other issue raised by the petitioners regarded the construction of a mountain bike trail. The Scottish Government submission noted the formal planning context, although in practice most such path building would not be regarded as needing planning permission. NatureScot has supported the development of guidance on building such trails, and we also note that unless the path building is both sustained and extensive, the long term effects on the woodland may be slight. Perhaps a reasonable comparison is the dramatic effects of a storm uprooting a large tree – whilst a temporarily large impact, such disturbance is natural and acceptable in a woodland, especially if other pressures are not too great.