

SOUTH SOMERSET WOODLAND HABITAT ACTION PLAN



Action plan name

South Somerset Woodland

Background and vision

Some parts of the South Somerset District were identified as priority areas - Strategic Nature Areas (SNAs) for creating new native broadleaved woodland during a process called 'Rebuilding Biodiversity' or 'Nature Map'. SNAs link areas of existing mapped areas of habitat identified as priorities in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) and identify priority areas for linking and buffering existing habitat patches with new habitat. The new South West Regional Spatial Strategy contains a map of SNAs for a variety of target habitats. (http://www.swenvo.org.uk/nature_map/downloads.asp - checked 05/02/2008).

Woodland is a Rebuilding Biodiversity target for the following Natural Areas in South Somerset District: the Penselwood area of the Wessex Vales the Mid Somerset Hills and the Blackdown Hills (http://www.english-nature.org.uk/pubs/gis/tech_na.htm - checked 05/02/2008)

The ultimate aim, by 2030, is for woodland SNAs to contain 30% of the target habitat and 30% other semi-natural Habitats.

Creation of such blocks of target and other semi-natural habitats are aimed at reducing gradual extinction of species from small patches of habitat and to allow species to adapt to climate change

In South Somerset district, Strategic Nature Areas for woodland often overlap with Strategic Nature Areas for other target areas. Where this is the case, the target habitat for one SNA can form the other semi-natural habitat target for overlapping SNAs.

Target habitats for SNAs that overlap with Woodland SNAs in South Somerset Include:

Calcareous Grassland (Mid Somerset Hills Natural Areas)

Neutral Grassland (Blackdown Hills and Wessex Vales Natural Areas)

Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pasture (Blackdown Hills and Wessex Vales Natural Areas)

There is also some overlap between Coastal and Floodplain grazing Marsh, Purple Moorgrass and Rush Pasture and Woodland SNAs on the Somerset Levels and Moors in South Somerset.

Plan species and habitats

Additionally, to achieve Rebuilding biodiversity targets there will be a need to create other semi-natural habitat alongside woodland. Existing non woodland semi-natural habitat within Woodland SNAs in South Somerset District include:

- Calcareous and Neutral Grassland
- Lowland Meadow
- Heathland
- Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pasture
- Wood Pasture, Parkland and Veteran Trees

Species identified as potential priorities for Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) action in South Somerset which are associated with broadleaved woodland are:

- Meadow Saffron
- Other Somerset Species Action Plan (SAP) species associated with Woodland in South Somerset include Long-eared Owl which requires a patchwork of trees and open ground

Habitat status

SNA's contain significant variety of woodland UK BAP Priority Habitats of which details can be found in the UKBAP (as listed 05/02/2008):

- Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland (English Nature, 2002) Wet Woodland – (<http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=4>)
- Upland Mixed Ash Woodland (<http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=3>)
- Lowland Wood-pasture and Parkland (<http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=5>)
- Lowland Beech and Yew woodland (<http://www.ukbap.org.uk/ukplans.aspx?ID=2>)

As well as containing the UKBAP Priority Habitats listed above, many of the existing areas of woodland in South Somerset are identified as Local Wildlife Sites. Of these many are likely to be fragments of ancient woodland.

There are several large woodlands currently with Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) status in South Somerset, for example Aller and Beer Woods and Cogley Wood.

Specific impacts/threats

Outside of the planning process (eg new roads and other developments) woodlands are well protected by the Forestry Commission (FC) under the 1967 Forestry Act, as amended, and have been for a good number of years. In the more distant past however, woodland suffered from a variety of threats that have left existing blocks of woodland small and fragmented and of much lower quality for wildlife. These include:

- Coniferisation of Ancient Woodland Sites has been a major impact in the past. Ancient woodland plants have a limited length of viability in the soil seed bank and could soon be lost forever in Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS).
- Reduction in size of woodland blocks
- Lack of management, leading to loss of physical structure, species diversity and natural regeneration
- Grazing by domestic stock also leading to loss of physical structure, species diversity and natural regeneration
- Loss, due to woodland fragmentation, of large woodland blocks capable of supporting invertebrates and birds requiring core woodland interiors (well away from woodland edge).
- Local species extinctions from fragmented woodlands

- Current levels of aerial Nitrogen deposition are often above critical loads for Woodland habitats leading to a loss of ground flora species diversity.

With potentially increasing markets for sustainable energy sources, woodlands may become more intensively managed for fuel production. While this may be of great benefit in some areas, it could lead to a significant reduction of deadwood in some woodlands. The challenge is to ensure a range of woodland types from intensively managed for biofuel production to non-interventionist with plentiful deadwood. The FC is well aware of the value of deadwood habitat, and actively promotes its development and retention, both within its own woodlands, and in the non FC woodlands with which it deals for grants and regulation purposes. According to statistics however, more than 50% of non-FC woodlands currently receive little or no management.

Key partners

South Somerset District Council (SSDC)
 South Somerset Local Strategic Partnership (SSLSP)
 Forestry Commission (FC)
 Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT)
 Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG)
 Woodland Trust (WT)
 Natural England (NE)
 Local landowners
 The Wildlife Trusts National Office (TWT)
 The South West Wildlife Trusts (TSWWT)
 Forum 21
 Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC)
 Somerset Biodiversity Management Group (SBMG)
 Somerset Biodiversity Coordinator (SBC)
 Biodiversity Southwest (BS)
 Blackdown Hills Area of Natural Beauty (BHAONB)
 Cranborne Chase Area of Natural Beauty (CCAONB)

Current action

- The Neroche Project is currently running, led by Forest Enterprise and has targets for linking and buffering existing woodland, and creation of other semi-natural habitat, including wood pasture and parkland to meet Rebuilding Biodiversity targets within some Woodland SNAs.
- Natural England's Entry-level scheme aims to provide protection for existing woodland through the provision of stock-proof fencing for

woodland boundaries and other measures. Semi-natural habitat is also considered in farm assessment.

- The Forestry Commission's English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) promotes sustainable woodland management. If within a SSSI, can also help to improve their condition to unfavourable recovering or favourable, towards meeting the governments Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets. It can also help create appropriate new woodland, eg new native woodland to link or buffer existing ancient woodland.
- A key aim of the English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) is to assist in the delivery of Priority Habitat and Species Action Plans for woodlands.
- Conservation organisations including the Woodland Trust, Somerset Wildlife Trust and Natural England manage existing woodlands of high biodiversity quality in South Somerset District.
- New Forest Management Plans are currently being written for areas of woodland in the east of South Somerset District in connection with Heritage Relief Applications.
- The Woodland Trust has a Woodland Officer carrying out advisory visits in the Penselwood area of the Cranborne Chase AONB

Target description and target goals

1. Maintain quality and extent of all areas of existing Priority Habitat woodland in South Somerset LBAP area.
Goal: At least 3052 ha maintained.
2. Increase cover and connectivity of native broadleaved woodland within Woodland SNAs
Goal: Increasing total area by 398 ha by 2010
3. Establish current extent of woodland and other semi-natural habitats within SNAs
Goal: Field Survey of Recent Aerial Photography Interpretation (API) habitat maps to ground truth area of BAP Priority Habitat
4. Maintain all existing areas of other non-woodland semi-natural habitats within woodland SNAs
Goal: 100% of existing BAP priority habitat
5. Increase area of land in management intended to create other semi-natural habitat component of woodland SNAs
Goal: 200 ha within woodland SNAs by 2011

Key factors

- **Grant aid funding from Forestry Commission.** The EWGS Woodland Creation Grant guide for the South West region of England states that priority is given to the achievement of National and regional Biodiversity, Habitat and Species Action Plans targets. Currently the Forestry Commission in the South West is favouring grant-aiding new woodland creation, particularly of new native woodlands, adjacent to existing ancient woodland. Although there is reasonable existing woodland cover within South Somerset woodland SNAs, a key to success will be to encourage the FC to agree to target woodland creation within SNAs (even if not adjacent to existing woodland). The FC has already established its own Ancient Woodland Priority Areas (AWPA) within the region, one of which is the 'Greater Exmoor' AWPAs, encompassing the Exmoor National Park Authority area, and extending to the south and east of Exmoor. Within these AWPAs, management of Ancient Woodlands, PAWS restoration, Woodland SSSI condition improvement, and the creation of appropriate New Native Woodlands, is given additional priority through grants and partnership working.
- **The Woodland Trust is funding an officer to carry out landowner advisory visits in the Penselwood area – primarily to achieve PAWS restoration.** This role could be expanded if funding was found.
- **Already funded work as part of the Neroche Project extends into woodland SNAs within South Somerset.**
- **Current lack of funding for Higher Level Scheme (HLS) and lack of targeting on SNAs** Natural England's Higher Level Scheme does not currently fund woodland creation, nor does it currently recognise SNAs in its targeting. NE therefore needs to be lobbied to target habitat creation and maintenance within SNAs to achieve re-building biodiversity targets. Moreover, HLS needs to be sufficiently well funded to achieve more than just Natural England's PSA targets on SSSIs.
- **Key landowners need to be identified and targeted for advice.** Woodland Trust, Woodland Trust, SWT, FWAG are well placed to liaise with landowners and deliver advice to landowners on how to achieve these targets, and this advisory role needs funding.

- **Need for detailed mapping of land use within SNAs.** Through API and targeted field survey. This landscape scale habitat mapping in will help target habitat creation and restoration and help monitor achievement of action and outcomes.
- **Revision of SNA boundaries for woodlands is desirable**
- **Urgency for removal of Conifers from Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites** to ensure survival of ancient woodland plants from soil seedbanks.
- **Revision of forest Plans for PAWS, perhaps through English Nature's Inheritance Tax Relief for example in the Penselwood area could be a key to achieving some SNA targets for woodland in the East of the District**

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Management

Action text	Lead organisation	Action start and end dates	Action goals	Key partners	Funding link to target
Advice to Landowners on management of existing UKBAP Priority woodlands and other habitat that will contribute to Rebuilding Biodiversity Targets	SWT/ FWAG	2008-2011	Advice to landowners of all 2976 ha of existing Priority Habitat woodland.	FC	At least partly funded by SSDC through support of Local Sites Advisory projects Target 1 action
Advice to landowners on habitat creation/restoration to achieve Rebuilding Biodiversity targets for Woodland SNA	Woodland Trust/ SWT/ FWAG	2008-2010	Advice to 30 landowners within Woodland SNAs	FWAG FC	Funding dependent. Requires fund raising by SBMG supported by Woodland Trust and SSDC Target 1 and 2 actions
Create new native broadleaved woodland within Woodland SNAs by combination of conversion of conifers and planting of new woodlands	Woodland Trust/ SWT/FWAG	By end 2010	Increase the cover and connectivity of native broadleaved woodland within Woodland SNAs by management of at least 50 ha	FC NE Landowners (SCC Countryside Grant Scheme)	Funding dependent Potential sources: FC, NE, other funding organisations including Somerset Landscape Scheme. Target 2 action
Support Somerset Countryside Grant Scheme	SSDC	On-going	At least 5 grants per year for South Somerset Woodlands	DCs	Target 1 and 4 actions
Achieve all Neroche Project targets for woodland relevant to project area in South Somerset	FE	By end 2011	100% targets achieved	All relevant partners particularly BHAONB	

Policy and legislation					
Lobby FC to target funding creation of new, and management of existing, woodlands in SNAs.	Biodiversity Southwest	Immediately, continuing to 2011 if necessary	Agree strategy for targeting Woodland Grant Scheme within SNAs and disseminate new criteria to those landowners within woodland SNAs.	NE TWT SWT SBMG Partners TSWWT	Their current policy is to target funding of woodland creation in the Greater Exmoor area only in the South West and other habitat creation through clearing conifers in Neroche Target 1 & 2 actions
Lobby NE to target funding of habitat creation/management of other seminatural habitat within SNAs	Biodiversity Southwest	Immediately, continuing to 2010 if necessary	2010 review of Agri-environment Schemes targets to take account of Rebuilding Biodiversity targets	TWT SWT SBMG Partners TSWWT	Current shortfall in funding of HLS outside SSSIs needs addressing as well as targeting of HLS within SNAs Target 4 and 5 actions
SSDC adopts 'Bioplan' so that all Planning applications can be screened against protected sites, legally protected species and Somerset LBAP Priority species	SSDC	By end 2009	'Bioplan' used for all Planning applications.	SERC	Funded through SLA with SERC. Requires SSDC to digitise all planning application boundaries and link to PS1 and PS2 codes Actions for targets 1, 2, 4 and 5
Education and awareness					
Advisory visits to all owners with PAWS in at least the Penselwood area	Woodland Trust	By end 2011	Landowners of at least 500 Ha of relevant land ownership visited	CCAONB NE	Relevant to encourage uptake of Inheritance Tax Relief linked to new forest Plans for these sites

Information and data					
Mapping of all habitats within woodland SNAs	SERC	2008-09	API Survey of all Woodland SNAs and buffer area by 2010		Funding dependant Target 3 action
Identification of all potential target areas of land for habitat restoration/recreation	SERC	2008-09	API Survey of all Woodland SNAs and buffer area by 2010		Funding dependent Target 3 action
Coordinate training and provide support to DC officers to report in BARS on achievement of BAP actions.	Somerset Biodiversity Coordinator	2008-09	Annually by end of year until 2011	SERC SSDC	Target 1, 3 and 4 actions
Set up methodology for monitoring the outcome of BAP actions	SERC	2008-09	1 outcome monitoring methodology agreed and funded		All Targets
Monitoring the outcome of BAP action	SERC	By August 2011 (or in time for 2010 UKBAP reporting round)	Analyse progress towards target habitats on specific action sites.	All action partners	Funding dependant (Achieving actions does not immediately guarantee creation of new semi-natural habitat). All Targets
Rebuilding biodiversity (Nature Map)					
Revise woodland SNA boundaries in South Somerset, possibly following Habitat Mapping	WT/ Biodiversity Southwest	2008-09	1 set of revised Woodland SNA boundaries adopted by Naturemap	All Rebuilding Biodiversity Partners	Targets based on Rebuilding Biodiversity Methodology
Economy and business					
Encourage use of local suppliers/ contractors in any work and encourage	All organisations concerned	Throughout project			

markets for timber produced					
Communities, health and well-being					
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Future projects may provide an opportunity for community involvement.
Climate change					
Investigate using locally grown timber products for energy production	LSP/WSC/Forum 21			Those setting up similar initiatives in Exmoor FWAG and possibly Blackdown Hills	While old growth woodland is of greatest value for wildlife, a balance could be achieved between long-term non-intervention woodland and woodland managed for commercial purposes. Trees at this latitude are only of value in locking up carbon when growing fast – as they do in a coppice cycle, and are ultimately only capable of reducing carbon outputs if they are used as fuel to replace fossil fuels
Tourism / access					
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	South Somerset's Biodiversity is key to its success as a tourist destination and of great importance to the

					enjoyment of those accessing the countryside.
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