

Woodland Indicator Workshop Held on 14th May 2008, Work Station, Sheffield

The 14 May 2008 Woodland Indicator Workshop was the first of a series of workshops looking at the use of biological indicators of ancient woodland. The Workshop considered the identification of ancient woodland sites using distinctive regional lists of vascular plants as indicators and had the following objectives:

- To establish a network of experts to support a review of woodland indicators;
- To gather current 'expert' opinion on woodland indicators;
- To identify key regional experts / champions;
- To review the regional coverage of indicators;
- To identify / clarify the problems with the current approach to woodland indicators; and
- To review and agree targets for research.

Presentations were given by:

- Dr Peter Glaves, Biodiversity and Landscape History Research Institute (BaLHRI)
- Dr Ian Rotherham, Sheffield Hallam University
- Richard Smithers, Woodland Trust
- Keith Kirby, Natural England
- Barry Wright, ADAS and Sheffield Hallam University

Copies of the presentations and the full minutes of the meeting will be made available at the BaLHRI web site.

The presentations were followed by a discussion regarding the issues relating to the use of botanical ancient woodland indicators and key priorities for research, specifically.

1 The need for robust and appropriate indicators: the classification of a site as an ancient woodland provides it with extra protection under policy guidance, PPS9. Species evidence can and has been used to determine ancient woodland character, but there are concerns regarding the robustness of current lists of indicators and their misuse and a need for robust and locally/appropriate indicators to be used to ensure correct identification of ancient woodland sites. Current lists also do not take into account other factors which may determine the presence or absence of an indicator species, for example internal variation within woodland, woodland size, soil acidity and wetness. Unless these factors are separated out there would be a tendency to identify base-rich woodlands (with greater diversity) as probable ancient woodlands and not picking out acidic woodlands, even though they may be of comparable antiquity. Analysis of local/regional specific sites and datasets is needed.

2 Use of indicator species to confirm ancientness: Indicator species can be used to verify the historic records of woodland continuity/ancientness. But if historic records are lacking woodland indicators can only be used as a means of 'indicating' ancient woodland status but not confirming it. It was also noted that there may be no species and that can be shown to be confined to ancient woodland and therefore no perfect ancient woodland indicator.

3 Perception and use of the term ancient woodlands: ancient woodland are seen to be more valuable than non-ancient woodland. The age of a woodland being used as a surrogate for ecological and/or historical value, i.e. the longer something has been there the longer things will have accumulated, be it cultural artifacts, biodiversity etc. There is however a need for underpinning science into how strongly specific species are associated with continuity of woodland including the rates at which species can colonise a woodland and how quickly they decline when conditions change.

4 Indicators of ancientness or indicators of continuity of environment/management: As indicated above ancientness implies a long continuity of a woodland and its associated environmental characteristics (shade, high humidity etc.) and that it is this continuity of environmental conditions which determines the species present. Are we really talking about "species associated with environmental continuity" or an "index of ecological continuity" rather than indicators of ancient woodland? Also most if not all British woodlands will have been cleared in the past, therefore woodlands that appeared on early maps and again on later maps could have been clear felled and treated as arable land in the intervening period. What is uncertain is how woodland indicators respond to such gaps in continuity and how long can a clearing remain un-wooded and still be regarded as an ancient woodland when the canopy is returned. woodland management has changed over history, ancient woodland indicators tend to be associated with dense enclosed high forest, but in the past other types of wooded environments including wood pasture were common and there is a need for indicators of these other types of ancient treed/wooded environments.

5 Survey and analysis methods: the type of survey method used (e.g. walk through surveys, transects etc.) can affect the number of species/indicators which are recorded and there needs to be an awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of survey techniques. There is a clear need for a rapid and robust method of identifying an ancient woodland and robust threshold values for ancient wooded sites. There is also a need for data to inform people actually using the concept of ancient woodland and a more robust definition of the term.