



SCOTTISH POLICY GROUP

BRITISH ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY

RIPARIAN WOODLANDS WORKSHOP BRIEF

The British Ecological Society - Scottish Policy Group (BES-SPG) organised a closed online workshop with a diverse set of stakeholders (including farmers, academics, land managers, and key individuals from research institutes and membership associations) to discuss riparian woodlands on the 5th of September 2023.

The workshop operated on Chatham House Rules and this briefing provides a summary of the discussion held during the workshop. Notes have been organised into key themes and include policy recommendations towards solutions to some of the issues raised by participants.

Please note this is not intended to be a literature review or an explanatory guide: **it is a reflection of the discussion of the workshop participants.**

Barriers to uptake of the creation and restoration of riparian woodlands in Scotland

Financing

The financial support provided is insufficient. Grants in Scotland cover only between 50 and 80% of the capital cost of riparian woodland creation, and smaller strips of woodland are often not covered by grants e.g many require at least 15m of woodland from the river edge. There are multiple environmental and societal benefits to the creation of riparian woodlands, but the challenges for land managers are not well recognised and accounted for in the funding.

Deer

Red deer populations are a major constraint on tree growth. This is a complex issue and there are concerns about the political and public acceptance of the deer culling required to reduce numbers to a sustainable level.

There can be a need for long-term deer fencing for woodland creation. However, this can impede deer movement and could affect sensitive habitats, as there is a risk that it concentrates deer in the wrong areas, for example on deep peat, which is sensitive to trampling. For woodland creation other less costly methods have been shown to work such as deer culling.

Competing land use interests

There are competing land use objectives to consider, for example in areas where there are other conservation priorities, such as ground nesting birds or wetlands. Reintroduced beavers will spread naturally and the effects of this need to be considered carefully. In areas where fishing is popular, there is a desire for an overhead fly casting space of 7-10 metres, which may not be possible once riparian woodlands are fully established.

There is a difference between land use priorities in the lowlands and uplands . On lowlands, farmers may be reluctant to give up good quality agricultural land to trees, which is a significant barrier. In the uplands, sporting interests are in conflict with woodland creation. The majority of land on Deeside, for example, is managed in particular for grouse and deer stalking. Many gamekeepers, landowners and sporting tenants view trees as harbourers of predators which will impact grouse numbers.

On the majority of hill ground, the density of browsers such as deer and sheep can impede natural tree regeneration, in some cases this can require fencing. This can be a barrier to uptake of new planting and natural regeneration projects.

Management considerations

Non-native species

Invasive non-native species (INNS) such as Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed and rhododendron need careful consideration in terms of management and prevention when creating riparian woodlands. There is also a risk of expansion of non-native conifers from nearby conifer plantations into newly-created riparian woodlands, which may have a negative impact on the planted species. Therefore there is a need to create and manage buffer zones around riparian woodlands to avoid this risk.

Grazers

The potential impact of beavers and deer needs to be considered. In general, the impact of grazing animals needs to be factored into the overall management strategy. A properly functioning riparian forest needs an appropriate understory , which also requires effective deer management. However, removing grazing may also increase the spread of Invasive non-native species (INNS). Holistic adaptive management will be key to finding a compromise between all these elements.

Incentivising Stakeholders

The acceptance of change and the idea of having more woodland varies between and within communities. The long-term vision should be to have more people working and living off the landscape through sustainable woodland management. There are currently challenges around incentivising riparian woodland creation especially for land managers who are short term tenants, this is due to the fact that many of the benefits take time to show. Tenancy and land reform regulations need to play a role in promoting riparian woodland creation and management. In particular, management costs may be quite high, and there is a need to find a way to value and reward land managers for the societal benefits they provide.

Riparian woodlands cross landscapes and connect habitats. Creating linear features like riparian woodlands across land with multiple owners can be difficult, and there is a need to take a flexible approach to coordinate efforts across different land owners and land managers.

Maintenance

Long-term maintenance needs to be considered, including protection for trees and potential infrastructure to allow access. This especially needs to be considered for the upland areas with very steep ground and snow where infrastructure can be hard to install and maintain.

Policy recommendations

Integrating riparian woodlands in policy

Riparian woodlands can play a key role in landscape restoration and should be highlighted as a priority in policy and planning documents. There is a need for better integration across the different policy frameworks that relate to riparian woodlands. When creating new policies, it is important to take into account that some of the benefits of riparian planting will not be realised for decades.

Collaboration

Partnership is essential for creating policy that will deliver for riparian woodland at a catchment scale. Collaboration between local communities, land managers, scientists, ecologists and policy makers is required to address issues at a larger scale. The diversity of community interests will need to be considered. There is a role for organisations, government ministers and local individuals to champion riparian woodlands and to facilitate bringing catchments together towards shared objectives and funding applications.

Engaging local communities

It is vital to engage the local communities and spread awareness about riparian woodlands and their benefits in terms of alleviating water scarcity, and reducing the impact of storms and floods on business and the community. There is a role here for schools and agricultural colleges in promoting understanding and awareness. Job opportunities in ecological and land management roles also need to be promoted in local communities.

River path networks

Coastal path networks have generally been quite successful in Scotland so far. Similarly, creating river path networks can allow public access to riparian woodlands and create awareness on the benefits they can bring.

Further recommendations

- Review and adjust grant rates to better cover the investment and management costs of riparian woodlands, including the associated opportunity costs.

- Explore how the Woodland Carbon Code could include riparian woodlands and its potential to attract private investment.
- Develop methods for monitoring and quantifying the benefits of riparian woodlands for landowners, land managers and investors. For example, highlighting their role in reducing nutrient pollution and improving water quality.
- Utilise media, films, and publicity to change public perceptions and gain local support for the creation of riparian woodlands.
- Engage rural stakeholders in discussions, offering solutions to concerns raised and identifying viable alternative pathways for those who will be affected by change.
- Encourage collaboration among multiple landowners and land managers for riparian woodland schemes and allow flexibility in their goals to accommodate diverse opportunities and landowner interests.
- Promote natural regeneration, where possible, with strategies tailored to consider the differences between lowlands and uplands.