

Community woodlands: an overview

As a result of both public demand and policy shifts in Scotland, England and Wales, the opportunities for civil society and community groups to own forests and woodlands, or contribute to decisions about their management are now significant. Community woodlands now number about 700 across Great Britain. The modes of ownership, engagement, decision-making and use of such forests vary widely. This project provided an overview, as a starting point for further analysis and evaluation.



"Our community woodland, I was a user before I got involved. And as soon as you go in and get to know the volunteer group it is unbelievable what is actually going on, bat surveys, coppicing, skills development, education ... It's all there open for everybody."

Background

Globally around 20% of forest cover is owned and / or managed by communities with a further 5% designated for use by indigenous communities. In England, Scotland and Wales histories of inequity in land ownership, variations in woodland type and ecology, and population pressures have all affected opportunities for community woodlands and forests. Rapidly changing policy contexts across Great Britain support the increased involvement of civil society and community groups in the management of environmental resources.

Objectives

- Provide an overview of the current number and variety of community woodlands in the three countries of Great Britain
- Identify key opportunities and constraints.

Methods

A series of studies combined surveys, qualitative approaches and workshops, including:

- three baseline studies, one each in Scotland (10 community groups), England (22 groups in 6 regions) and Wales (14 groups), using a questionnaire to collect data on the numbers, locations, history, and characteristics of community woodland groups
- a study characterising community woodland group support needs in England using focus group discussions with representatives of 15 community groups
- two case studies of communities involved in the National Forest Land Scheme (20 people), Scotland
- two seminars with key stakeholders.

Findings

1. Current estimates indicate at least 200 community woodland groups in Scotland, 300 in England and 200 in Wales.
2. The size of such woodlands ranges from 1 ha to more than 1000 ha.

3. Community woodlands are owned by communities, social enterprises, local authorities, private landowners or the public / national forest estate. Where not owned by the community, arrangements are formalised through mechanisms including leaseholds, partnerships with the owner, and written or verbal agreements.
4. Community legal structures also vary widely. Land reform law in Scotland requires communities to form a company if they wish to access the 'community right to buy'. Not-for-profit companies and social enterprises are becoming increasingly important.
5. Ownership or other forms of direct community control such as leasehold are more prevalent in Scotland and Wales, whereas many groups in England are content with opportunities to contribute to planning and conservation activities.
6. Productive use of community woodlands is also more significant in Scotland and Wales. In contrast most groups in England focus on conservation and recreation objectives. Community woodlands are also widely used for outdoor and environmental education.
7. In some parts of Great Britain economic use of woodland by civil society organisations is hampered by availability of suitable commercial woodland. Furthermore, the start-up costs to woodland and forest management are a barrier and government grant schemes have been pivotal in providing the required financial support.
8. Paperwork and bureaucracy (particularly insurance and grant applications) represent a significant burden and concern to community woodland groups.
9. Evidence of impact and outcomes is patchy and is usually only collected for projects with external funding.

Recommendations

- The numbers and diversity of community woodlands in Great Britain are now evident but need to be described and documented in a more systematic way to enable lessons to be learnt and for models to be promoted that suit particular contexts.
- Studies of impacts and outcomes are a high priority.

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