

Chapter 9 Dealing with conflicting management priorities

9.1 Introduction

In a situation where there are conflicting ideas on how to manage a specific tree or a site containing veteran trees:

- Ensure the needs of veteran trees are built into site management plans.
- Gather as much accurate and up to date information as you can about the situation. If necessary carry out survey work/historical research.
- Meet those with an interest in the particular issue and don't rely on assumptions about their likely views.
- Approach the situation with an open mind and be honest about the relative merits of the site/tree. Encourage others to be too.
- Weigh up the relative importance of the site/tree for the various interests, assign relative weights if this helps to analyse the situation.
- If an easy solution cannot be found, look at the possibility of a compromise that does not result in significant loss of interest for conflicting issues.
- Visit other sites with similar conflicts and learn from them.

More information about specific veteran trees or sites with veteran trees is available in the following data base (for contact addresses see appendix 6):

- The Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England - Prepared by English Heritage. Published as a set 46 county volumes and in most reference libraries and local planning authorities. Also available for purchase from English Heritage. An updated edition is being prepared and it is hoped will be available in digitised form from 2001.
- Champion trees (Tree Register of the British Isles).
- Invertebrate Site Register (Contact the relevant Statutory Nature Conservation Organisation).
- English Nature is collating a database giving pointers to information sources on the wildlife and heritage information of parks and wood-pastures.

9.2 Specific potential problems in veteran tree management and suggestions for how to overcome them

9.2.1 Habitat or hazard

Problem : A veteran tree that is decaying and has several dead branches in the crown can be a concern to safety.

Discussion: It is inevitable that old trees will have decayed wood, cavities and dead branches, all features which enhance their habitat value. Contrary to much popular opinion, this does not mean that they are necessarily dangerous. All trees have the potential to cause damage to differing degrees. A risk assessment needs to be made for each situation together with the type and likelihood of damage. There is, therefore, no such thing as a perfectly safe tree and some degree of risk will remain even in a sound tree with no defects. The task is to evaluate the hazard that the defects pose and the risk of damage to people or property if the tree, or part of it, fails, and to take appropriate action to reduce the risk to an acceptable level. Health and safety legislation recognises that it is unreasonable, and in many cases not feasible, to eliminate risk. It is possible to have habitat and hazard. It is not a question of either or. Owners and managers may be alarmed by reports of individual judgements in cases

involving trees, but the law does not require a choice to be made between trees, their habitat and people and property. It is a matter of assessing whether the dangers posed by the tree could have been anticipated, and whether these dangers could have been countered by means of moderate and reasonable remedies. Those who fail to understand this, pose a great threat to the veteran trees of Britain.

9.2.2 Nature conservation and designed landscapes

Problem: A designed landscape that has matured and is now in decline has increased in nature conservation value. Priorities for management and repair could affect either the historic or nature conservation value.

Discussion: In many cases this conflict is perceived through a misunderstanding or lack of appreciation of the other parties' objectives. For example, perpetuating the pattern and vistas in the landscape may be a priority for one party, the species selection and management of trees for nature conservation may be a priority for another party. Here, the presumption of retaining veteran trees, their survival and ensuring that there is a new generation of trees is desirable for both parties.

Where a genuine conflict of interests occurs it is important that each party states their ideal objectives. The situation should be approached with an open mind and the will to succeed. Issues should be put in perspective by understanding and appreciating the value of the site/tree in relation to others, for the various interests. Where necessary a compromise must be reached between the loss of the historic fabric and loss of habitat.

9.2.3 Conflicts of interest between the needs of different organisms

Problem: A site may be important for rare lichens preferring an open canopy and rare invertebrates needing a shady environment.

Discussion: An accurate evaluation is needed of the relative importance of these groups and where they are found on the site. Management can usually accommodate both or, it may be found that the conservation status of one species is considerably higher than that of the other. It is very unlikely that a single tree would be the home for two extremely rare organisms requiring opposing management.

9.2.4 Commercial aspects of the site conflict with the ideal management for nature conservation reasons

Problem: In commercial forestry or agriculture veteran trees may take up land which could be more productive.

Discussion: The retention of individuals and groups of overmature and veteran trees, as well as dying and dead trees, is recommended in the UK Forestry Standard (Forestry Authority, 1998) as well as the Forest Nature Conservation Guidelines (Forestry Commission 1990). It is also recommended to identify younger trees to become the veterans for the future. Loss of revenue may not be as great as expected and being informed about the conservation value for the old trees may be enough to ensure their survival. There is no evidence that retained dead wood in broadleaved forestry plantations puts commercial crops at risk (Winter 1993). Grants may be available to manage veteran trees in a variety of different situations, (Woodland Grant Scheme, Countryside Stewardship, etc).

9.2.5 Increasing the productivity of the land conflicts with ideal tree management

Problem: There is a desire to increase the fertility and productivity of grazing land, in ways that are detrimental to old trees. This may be by applying fertiliser, chemical sprays or ploughing close to the trees.

Discussion: Grants may help with this (eg Countryside Stewardship), or look at alternative farming systems (eg organic) which may attract set-up grants and a premium on products.

9.2.6 Public access causes detrimental effects to the trees

Problem: Pressures to increase public access may increase the need for safety work.

Discussion: Draw up a clear safety policy for the site which states the importance of the trees and the methods used for surveying and implementing work needed. Consider methods of visitor management such as zoning, re-routing paths, re-locating car parks or picnic sites, or changing ground vegetation (ie long grass, dead hedges) to encourage people away from high risk areas. Talk to organisations that have experience of solving similar problems, eg The National Trust.

9.2.7 Aesthetically appealing or ugly and untidy

Problem: Trees that appear wonderful, interesting and beautiful to some people are grotesque and ugly to others. While the sentiments of owners and managers have undoubtedly caused the demise of ancient trees in the past (and also saved many too) this should not normally be a cause of conflict today. The retention of dead wood on the ground is still sometimes removed because it is viewed as being 'untidy'. This is an especially important issue in historic parkland where public access has a significant effect on management.

Discussion: Education and information is often the key here. Pointing out the age of the tree and what it has 'seen' is usually a better starting point than the number of insects and fungi it houses (see also section 6.3).

Veteran pollards in Epping Forest

In the period leading up to the Epping Forest Act in 1878 negative attitudes had grown towards the pollarded trees. They were seen as symbolic of a particular way of life and indicative of past mismanagement and over-exploitation of the Forest. One result of the Act was to change the emphasis of Forest management from protection of Commoners rights, to the provision of a recreation area. Although the Act protected the pollards many influential people (including members of the Essex Field Club) desired a 'natural' appearance and saw no place for pollards. A journalist described the hornbeam pollards as 'short, shabby, scrubby, indescribably mean and ugly'. Even the president of the Field Club, a biologist of some renown, thought it "desirable that many of the pollards should be removed" and saw "no reason why in time they should not all be replaced by spear-trees." From Dagley & Burman (1996).

9.2.8 Exotic or native species

Problem: There is sometimes a desire to plant exotic species on a site (eg for timber purposes or in a designed landscape or garden). Any potential impact of this will depend largely on the species concerned.

Discussion: Weigh up the likely response of the species and the naturalness of the site. What is appropriate for an ancient semi-natural woodland may well be different from that for a formal garden. Introducing *Rhododendron ponticum* should be opposed (it can contribute to the death of veteran trees by competing for water when growing around them and also prevent any regeneration owing to its heavy shade), but specimen trees in a formal garden setting are unlikely to present any problems. Even on sites with no particular historic interest some exotics can provide a useful 'stop-gap'. Fast growing species such as sweet chestnut (Figure 47), and even sycamore, may provide suitable conditions for saproxylic species if there are no suitable aged native trees on the site. In designed landscapes some exotic species may need to be planted to provide historical continuity. If possible, plant or encourage native species grown from local stock.

Figure 47. See colour plate page 92.

9.2.9 Financial constraints restrict the amount of work that is desired

Problem: The ideal management is too costly to achieve.

Discussion: Do the best you can and prioritise the management so that important work is done first. Remember that a long-term view is necessary when dealing with trees. Not all the work will need doing at once so a 20-year plan may be quite good enough and a short period of time in terms of the life of the tree.