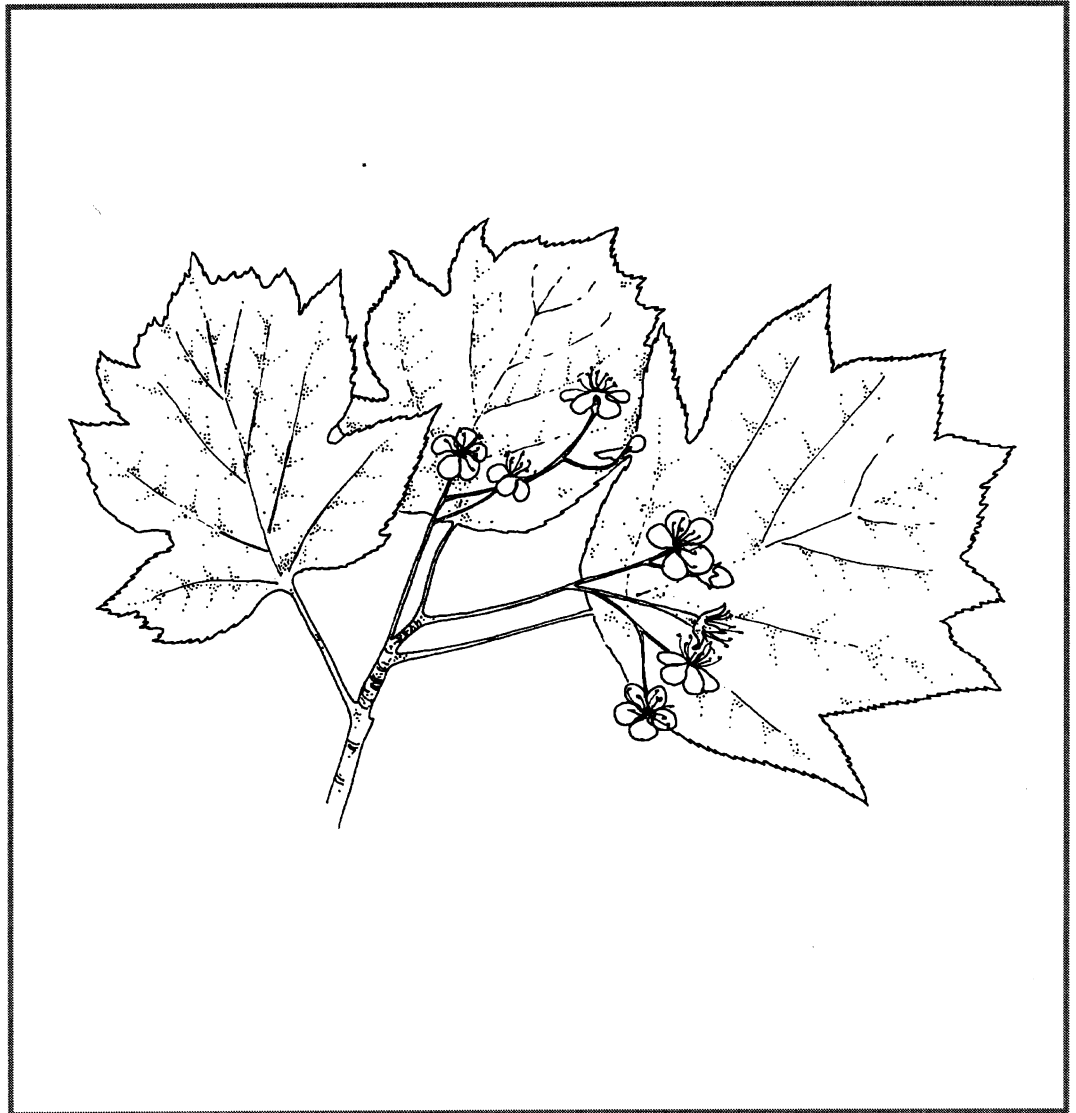


# Nature conservation input to Indicative Forestry Strategies in England

No. 198 - English Nature Research Reports



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English Nature Research Reports

Number 198

**Nature conservation input to Indicative Forestry Strategies in England**

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## **Preface**

In 1992 DoE issued a circular to councils in England and Wales encouraging them to develop Indicative Forestry Strategies (IFS). While only a few strategies have so far been produced there have been other related initiatives such as landscape strategies which cover some of the same ground.

In 1992 the Countryside Commission, Countryside Council for Wales and English Nature considered the production of a joint leaflet to help local authorities take account of landscape, recreation and nature conservation issues. Subsequently we decided against this approach, but we feel that the material that was put together may be useful to agency staff in any discussions that they have with local authorities on IFS.

We have therefore produced it here, primarily for internal use. It should not be regarded as the official policy for any of the agencies. The emphasis is on nature conservation, but shorter sections on landscape and recreation issues have been included as appendices. Often these topics will be considered alongside the nature conservation input. Any feedback on IFS development would be useful.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Most of the drafting of this was done by Alison Rush (EN), Lisa Hooper (CC) and Hilary Miller (CCW). Others inside and outside the agencies provided helpful comments, while Stefa Kaznowska greatly improved the English.



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## Introduction

The Countryside Commission, English Nature, and the Countryside Council for Wales share a vision of the future for our woods and forests. All agree that we have a woodland resource of unique character and great value, but which needs to be increased in extent and enhanced in quality. England has only 7.3% forest cover and Wales 11.6%, whereas other countries in Europe have much more. France, Spain and Italy, for example, have more than 20% forest cover each. We believe that England should double its tree cover to 15% by the year 2050 - a target that could have wide benefits for our landscape, for nature conservation, and for all who use and enjoy woodlands.

For the sake of timber production, sustaining biodiversity, enhancing the landscape and meeting the needs of local communities for recreation, new woods are needed and existing woodland needs to be sustained. The Government has advised local authorities and National Park Authorities to produce Indicative Forestry Strategies (IFS), enabling them to plan the creation and management of woodland in ways that meet local needs.

## Background

Strategies were pioneered in Scotland and subsequently adopted, in a modified format, for England and Wales through DoE Circular 29/92 (Welsh Office Circular 61/92) - *Indicative forestry strategies*. This guidance has been welcomed by the Countryside Commission, the Countryside Council for Wales and English Nature.

The Countryside Commission appreciates the beneficial effects of woodlands on landscape and their value, both actual and potential, for recreational use. English Nature is concerned to protect woodlands of nature conservation interest and to ensure that new planting both safeguards existing wildlife habitats and creates new ones. The remit of the Countryside Council for Wales spans landscape, recreation and nature conservation. We jointly hope to see Indicative Forestry strategies or equivalent initiatives in place throughout England and Wales by the year 2005.

This report expands on the advice given in the Circular by identifying the landscape, nature conservation and recreation issues that local authorities should be encouraged to consider in preparing strategies. It also lists sources of further information and advice.

### What is an Indicative Forestry Strategy?

An Indicative Forestry Strategy is more than just a way of increasing tree cover. It should also ensure that the right sorts of new woodlands are planted in the right places, and meet the needs of local people, the economy and the environment. It provides opportunities to:

- protect existing wildlife habitats and create new ones;
- conserve and enhance the landscape;
- meet the need for informal recreation and outdoor education;
- integrate local priorities at their boundaries.

It may also seek to improve management of existing woods, guide the choice of species for different locations, and promote multi-purpose forestry.

An Indicative Forestry Strategy can define the context - social, economic, ecological, historical and cultural - of proposed new plantings, community woodland projects, landscape restoration schemes and new initiatives such as the National Forest and Community Forests. The information on which the Strategy is based can also be used to inform proposals for land use and areas of constraint in development plans.



### *The role of the Forestry Authority*

The Forestry Authority is part of the Forestry Commission and is responsible for implementing Government forestry policy through the setting of environmental standards, regulation and grant-aid, together with promotion and advice. In accordance with agreed procedures, it consults local authorities and statutory agencies on grant applications (or other proposals requiring its approval). Under new arrangements from autumn 1996 a register of felling and planting applications will be available for public scrutiny in Forestry Authority and Local Authority offices. The Forestry Authority may also require applicants to undertake formal environmental assessments.

The Forestry Authority expects that consultees will benefit from Indicative Forestry Strategies as a framework within which they can consider individual applications for grant-aid to establish woods. The Government has said that the Forestry Authority should always be involved in the preparation of Indicative Forestry Strategies.

### **Preparing an Indicative Forestry Strategy**

In its Circular, the Government recommends that, to be effective, strategies should be prepared through close cooperation between all the interested parties, including:

- the Forestry Authority;
- the timber industry;
- landowners and their agents;
- farmers;
- conservation, recreation and amenity interests;
- business and commerce.

Wide participation in the development of a strategy encourages a sense of shared 'ownership'. We therefore recommend that local authorities set up a local 'woodland forum' for this purpose, if one does not already exist. This will allow everyone with an interest in the local environment and its woodland to be contacted at an early stage, preferably when background information for the Strategy is being collected. Through the forum they can then be consulted about drafts of both the general policy statement and the strategy map.

For the same reasons, public consultation is also a valuable part of the process. The draft general policy statement and the strategy map should be made available to the public, in the same way that Local and Structure Plans are currently available for public inspection at Council offices. This will require appropriate publicity.

The process of preparing the Strategy is outlined in the Government Circular. There is, however, the need for periodic updates. Every two years the information on grants, legislation and so on should be checked for accuracy and the Strategy amended if necessary. It should be reviewed more fully at least every five years, using information gained from monitoring achievement of its key objectives.

The Circular's advice makes it clear that Forestry Strategies are indicative and are not intended to be prescriptive. Their preparation is intended to complement consultation procedures and will not replace them.

### *Collecting and presenting information*

The Government Circular recommends that the Strategy themes be schematised in a summary map built up from layers of information of the various environmental factors influencing the Strategy. These would include existing woodland, built up areas, existing landscape and nature conservation designations, agricultural land classes, old mineral workings, geological and archaeological sites, areas vulnerable to soil and water acidification and areas for new planting.

## **Nature conservation inputs**

Sustainable woodland management and the creation of new woodland are key factors in conserving biodiversity. The guiding principle of Indicative Forestry Strategies should be to ensure that the area's characteristic biodiversity and natural features are maintained and, where appropriate, enriched. The first step is to identify the main components of the nature conservation interest of the area to be covered by the Strategy. This involves collecting and analysing data on:

- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and National Nature Reserves (NNRs);
- semi-natural and other good wildlife habitats;
- regionally important populations of species likely to be affected by the establishment of new woodland;
- habitats and water catchments vulnerable to acidification;
- Local sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs);
- Regionally Important Geological/geomorphological Sites (RIGs).

### **Natural Areas of England**

When mapping the nature conservation interest of an area, it is important not to concentrate just on discrete sites or species populations, but to build up an integrated picture of the whole area. In England, English Nature's Natural Areas Initiative has developed this integrated approach to describe the character of the natural environment over the whole country, as a framework for environmental planning and conservation action.

English Nature has mapped England in a series of nearly 100 Natural Areas, each of which is distinctive in terms of its mix of geology, landforms, habitat types, land uses and characteristic species. Currently, English Nature is working with local communities to define more closely the characteristics of each Natural Area and develop its key nature conservation objectives. This information should closely match the needs of Indicative Forestry Strategies.

English Nature is working closely with the Countryside Commission to relate their Natural Areas map to the Commission's Countryside Character Programme to produce a single map of England's regional character by the end of 1996.

Species information should also be considered. For example data from county breeding bird atlases can be used to identify areas of high ornithological value using groups of characteristic species (Table 1).

**Table 1. Bird groups indicating high ornithological interest**

<b>Uplands</b>	merlin golden plover wheatear twite	peregrine dunlin raven	black grouse red grouse short-eared owl
<b>Lowland heath</b>	nightjar stone curlew	woodland stonechat	dartford warbler hobby
<b>Lowland wet grassland</b>	pochard redshank lapwing	teal snipe yellow wagtail	shoveler curlew garganey
<b>High interest farmland</b>	marsh harrier stone curlew corn bunting	barn owl lapwing grey partridge	buzzard cirl bunting
<b>Woodland</b>	redstart woodcock lesser spotted woodpecker	nightjar woodlark pied flycatcher	nightingale hawfinch goshawk

**Note:** Very rare species are not included, eg ruff, black-tailed godwit, Montague's harrier.

## The role for existing woods in IFS

Sustainable management of the existing woodland resource should be a key objective of Strategies. The nature conservation value of existing woodland should, therefore, be reviewed and its management needs identified.

Some woods of high nature conservation value benefit from keeping intervention to a minimum and allowing natural ecological processes to operate, and Strategies should identify such woods. Opportunities for bringing other woods into management should be identified in Strategies and frequently management of neglected woods and encouragement of natural regeneration should take priority over new planting.

The objectives of management thus depend on the characteristics of the wood but may include:

- maintaining or developing structural diversity;
- maintaining glades, rides, ponds and wet areas;
- retaining some trees or groups of trees well beyond normal rotation age;
- maintaining the diversity of woodland species;
- reintroducing traditional management techniques, eg pollarding, coppicing;
- restoring native tree cover to replanted ancient woods;
- excluding livestock and introducing control on grey squirrels and deer.

## **IFS and opportunities for creating new woodland**

The contribution that new woodland could make to the biodiversity and natural features of an area should be clearly identified in the Strategy. New woods should be located where they will do most to enhance the landscape and local mix of habitats. Areas of high existing value for nature conservation (semi-natural habitat and other good wildlife habitat) should be avoided. Instead the aim should be to plant on areas of low existing value, such as arable or improved grassland, and to create linkages or 'stepping-stones' between areas of woodland.

Tree species native to the locality usually provide the best wildlife habitat, and stock of local origin should be used if possible. Including some native shrub species will help the new woodland to develop structural diversity and increase the opportunities for wildlife. Allowing woods to develop through natural regeneration rather than by planting can provide additional nature conservation benefits. This is particularly valuable on land next to or near ancient semi-natural woods, or other features such as streams or hedgerows.

### *Safeguarding small features*

In lowland areas wildlife habitat is much fragmented, and small pockets of habitat may exist surrounded by large areas of low value for nature conservation. In some localities, particularly urban areas, even single trees may be important. Strategies will not be able to pinpoint all these small features, but should indicate where they are likely to be found.

## **Forestry in the uplands**

Upland areas support valued wildlife communities such as heather moorland and blanket bog and rare upland birds such as red kite, merlin and peregrine. Existing semi-natural upland woods are generally fragmented and often in poor condition.

In the past, poorly-designed planting caused significant environmental damage and landscape deterioration in the uplands that is only now gradually being addressed through forest re-design. In 1988, this was part of the reason why Ministers announced a presumption against predominantly large-scale conifer planting in most of upland England. Any new planting must be guided to suitable locations, have high design standards and be where tree planting would be of environmental benefit, if carried out in accordance with the standards set by the Woodland Grant Scheme. Even so afforestation can cause major environmental impacts in acid-sensitive areas by acidifying freshwaters, catchments and soils, and the Environmental Protection Agency should be consulted over this aspect of strategy preparation.

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## Appendix 1. Landscape issues

(Notes prepared by Lisa Hooper and Hilary Miller)

Tree planting can transform landscapes - but it can also damage them. Large-scale upland afforestation from the 1960s, for example, earned forestry a reputation for unsympathetic treatment of landscape from which it is only slowly recovering. Nowadays the right conditions exist for forestry immeasurably to enhance our landscapes, whether through careful management of old woods or the creation of thoughtfully located and designed new woods. This underlines the importance and value of producing Strategies.

### *Landscape assessment*

The Circular identifies the need to produce a map showing broad landscape types as part of the process of preparing a Strategy. Such a map needs to be based on an assessment of landscape character. Apart from the key role an assessment will play in the preparation of a Strategy, there is growing recognition that landscape assessments can help in many other aspects of countryside planning and management.

Landscape assessment demands a multi-dimensional approach, which recognises local distinctiveness and diversity. The methods used will depend on resources, but should be multi-disciplinary and may use a combination of desk studies and field surveys. A variety of techniques exist for pulling together and analysing the data. In the case of landscape assessment for forestry, topography often assumes high importance, leading to classifications based to a large extent on land form. Classifications usually identify a series of zones with common characteristics which provide a framework for different sets of prescriptions regarding trees and tree-planting.

The Countryside Commission is currently working on a new framework for such assessments, call the Countryside Character Programme (CCP). Following a pilot study in the south-west of England, it is defining a series of regional landscape character areas, each with its own detailed landscape description and analysis. By 1996 it is intended that this will cover the whole of England. The baseline landscape assessments could also be used in Indicative Forestry Strategy preparation. Eventually the CCP will help to inform all areas of countryside and landscape management.

CCW is also in the process of developing a method of landscape assessment appropriate to the richly varied landscape of Wales.

### *Integrating new woodlands into the landscape*

Expansion of tree cover almost inevitably introduces trees to areas which may have no recent history of tree cover. In order to maximise the very considerable benefits of tree-planting, we need to ensure that the most appropriate sites, from an amenity standpoint, are chosen: at the same time having regard for other existing values, such as nature conservation.

### *Existing woods*

Indicative Forestry Strategies offer local authorities the opportunity to consider areas of existing woodland and to make recommendations about their future management. This may be particularly relevant in areas with woods which either already confer a variety of public benefits or have the capacity to do so. The process may also help to identify past mistakes by

identifying modifications to boundaries that would help to improve the 'fit' of existing woods in the landscape.

### *Historic landscapes*

Archaeological features, either individual sites or historic landscapes and patterns that are vulnerable to forest expansion, should be identified. Historic landscapes, where trees, native or introduced, make a significant contribution, may be highlighted as the focus for more specialised studies. Through careful design, we can begin to create tomorrow's historic landscapes through today's tree-planting.

#### **Historic landscapes and geological features**

Historic landscapes, from prehistoric to recent times, and geological exposures or geomorphological features are an important part of our heritage. They more often survive relatively intact in the uplands, because these areas have tended, until recently, to have escaped the more intensive land uses associated with the lowlands. The Welsh uplands are especially rich in this respect. Afforestation can destroy these landscapes and features physically, when, for instance, earthworks are ploughed out or features blanketed by trees. Even where planting avoids specific features, it may fragment the landscape or landform and disrupt its unity, integrity and coherence.

## Appendix 2. Recreation and access issues

(Notes prepared by Lisa Hooper and Hilary Miller)

Woodland near villages and towns has particular recreational potential, especially in its role as an outdoor arena for education and play involving children. Woods and forests are also of wider recreational benefit, whether this takes the form of walkers using a simple right of way through a wood or more formal organised sports, such as orienteering or shooting.

Developing the recreational potential and use of woods may involve opening the wood to low-key public access or providing more sophisticated facilities. Various grants are available to help woodland owners, and those establishing new woods, to provide the basic infrastructure required. The kinds of facilities which are often provided in woods in private and public ownership include:

- car parking space;
- rides and glades;
- way-marked trails;
- interpretive signs and leaflets;
- picnic sites and seats;
- trails suitable for use by the disabled;
- sculpture trails;
- 'Tree-top trails';
- facilities which support organised sporting activities.

Woods are capable of accommodating a greater variety of people and activities, without groups intruding on one another, than many more open habitats; a feature which is particularly valuable where use is high, although occasionally efforts will need to be made to balance different uses.

Recreation is a particularly important feature of the Community Forest programme, and of the National Forest. These schemes, which are intended to transform urban and virtually tree-less environments into better places in which to live, work and play, place a lot of emphasis on the public benefits of recreation provision. These areas have their own strategic and business plans which need to be integrated with Indicative Forestry Strategies.

One grant supplement, the Community Woodland supplement, is already targeted on the Community and National Forests and on other areas identified locally as offering significant recreational potential.

Presently, about half of Britain's forests are owned by the Forestry Commission, which manages them so as to maximise a range of public benefits including timber production, nature conservation, landscape quality and recreation. As part of its programme of rationalisation, the Forestry Commission is selling a number of these woods and, prior to sale, local authorities may be given the chance to sign a legal agreement which protects public access to them in perpetuity. Indicative Forestry Strategies which address the issue of recreation could help local authorities to decide which woods need this special protection, by identifying the scale of local demand for access to woods, the availability of alternative sites, the intrinsic interest of the wood compared with others in the locality, etc.