

Wales Upland Ecosystem Group Priority Action

Nant Gwynant Valleyside Woodlands

There is an estimated area of 39,000ha of 'western' oak woodland in Wales and 17,000ha of upland mixed ash woodland, which are 40% and 25% of the UK resource respectively. However, woodland, which could be considered as being 'upland' in Wales, is limited in extent and only constitutes a small part of this western woodland. In a more natural situation, woodland would cover most valley sides and grade into scrub with altitude, but there are very few examples of natural treelines left in Wales and the condition of most existing woods is generally poor, with many being heavily grazed by sheep and goats, which reduces regeneration and will eventually result in their disappearance. This will result in the loss of not only the trees, but also much of the flora and fauna associated with this habitat. The establishment of more upland woodland would mitigate this and also have a role to play in the prevention of erosion and in slowing rainwater run-off and consequent downstream flooding in the lowlands. There is a large scope for the regeneration, particularly of native oak woodland, on slopes dominated by overgrazed, acid grassland, gorse or bracken. This would remove the necessity of repeated spraying or cutting of the latter two species and the extension of scrub onto many bare ffridds would improve conditions for birds of this habitat. Many native western woodlands are nationally important for the invertebrates, lichens, bryophyte communities and ferns they support and ash woods are amongst the richest habitats for wildlife in the uplands.

The Nant Gwynant valley supports small areas of native woodland along the lower slopes or in the more sheltered valleys and are dominated by species such as oak, birch and ash, with rowan. These are all part of the Eryri SAC Annex 1 habitat 'Old sessile oakwoods with Ilex and Blechnum'. The Beddgelert & Aberglaslyn woodlands SAC reaches almost as far as Beddgelert, but there is little continuity between these woodlands and those in the Gwynant valley, also, much of the woodland occurs in small patches and a large proportion is in poor condition, with little regeneration and a continuing pressure from grazing sheep and goats.

Due to the degraded nature and limited extent of upland woodland in Wales, the restoration and expansion of oak and ash woodland in the Welsh uplands is a priority long-term conservation objective. This applies particularly to the woodlands in the Gwynant valley, where existing fragmented woodland habitat already exists and where there is a need to enhance and consolidate existing blocks, renew a more dynamic and sustainable age structure and encourage movement upslope. Expansion uphill to form natural treelines is a priority in this valley, to develop natural transitions to scrub and heath as trees will naturally be dwarfed and change in composition with altitude and exposure. The linking of woodland/scrub and heath will encourage a more natural dynamic of growth and succession within and between habitats, rather than the current focus of maintaining separate habitat identities and locations.

This will be a long-term project and some progress has already been made, but much more needs to be done. The management of goats will be a key feature as the high numbers resident in the valley continually damage the young growth and effectively prevent regeneration in some areas. The upper slopes need to be prepared for regeneration, possibly by grazing with heavy stock, exclosures need to be erected where needed and existing stock movements managed more effectively. This would involve co-operation between CCW, NT, SNPA, FCW and private landowners. This should be linked in with the priority project for control and management of Rhododendron in Nant Gwynant & Nantmor.

Action Required

- Improved management of livestock including use of heavy livestock to prepare for regeneration
- Erection of exclosure where necessary
- Management of feral goat population

Species Interest

Key Section 42 Species

Juniper *Juniperus communis*