



<u>Committee and Date</u> Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership  23 <sup>rd</sup> March 2023	<u>Item</u>  <b>4</b>
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## **ANCIENT WOODLANDS AND PEATLANDS PROJECTS UPDATE**

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### **Summary**

This paper gives members an update on the recently started Shropshire Hills AONB Ancient Woodlands project and the Peatlands project in the Upper Clun.

### **Recommendation**

The Partnership is recommended to note the update and ask questions or make comments.

### **Background**

#### Shropshire Hills AONB Ancient Woodland Restoration Project

In the Shropshire Hills AONB, Ancient Semi-Natural Woodlands (ASNW) are key natural assets and are a highly important for habitat in the landscape, supporting a wealth of biodiversity. Ancient woodlands cover 4.97% of the AONB, but approximately two thirds of that area are sites classed as Plantation on Ancient Woodland sites (PAWS). These are woods that have been planted with trees that would not naturally grow there, particularly non-native conifers.

This project aims to overcome some of the barriers to restoration of ASNW sites and PAWS within the Shropshire Hills AONB. We are working collaboratively with the Woodland Trust, who secured project funding from the Forestry Commission's Woods into Management Forestry Innovation Funds. The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership team will be delivering the project, primarily through our new Woodland Project Officer (Dougald Purce), with support from Natural Environment Officers, Mike Kelly and Rachel Glover. Dougald Purce joins the team with a wealth of experience and will be working to engage and advise woodland owners about the potential their sites have for restoration. Dougald's role on the project is full time from 14<sup>th</sup> March onwards, with the project running until March 2025.

Extensive mapping work has already been undertaken by Mike Kelly to identify key sites, with the project focusing on identifying ASNW and PAWS sites, including smaller woodlands owned and managed by private landowners and farmer. Historical mapping records have also been drawn up to help inform the project's focus.

For many sites, the first step will be to undertake a woodland condition assessment, identifying woodland attributes, assessing condition and biodiversity indicators. Depending on the woodland owner's long-term aspirations, such information could then be used to inform a site management plan, advising on key restoration measures that could be

implemented. There is also the potential then to seek funding for restoration works from organisations such as Severn Trent Water, who are looking to improve biodiversity. Such works could include: felling works on PAWS; thinning to encourage native broadleaves and increase light levels to the forest floor; replanting with native broadleaves; fencing to reduce grazing pressure or coppicing works.

At this stage, we have begun initial discussions with 8 woodland owners regarding their sites and have agreed with them that woodland condition assessments would be a useful first step. Dougald will be working alongside Woodland Trust consultants to carry out these assessments and then take recommendations forward. The project has been promoted on our website and through other networks, and we are in touch with a range of other woodland owners who are also interested in being involved. We are also promoting the project through different professional networks and working groups and would encourage partnership members to promote the project to any potential interested stakeholders where possible.

### Peatlands Project in the upper Clun catchment

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) states that peatlands are among the most valuable ecosystems on earth, through their roles in supporting rare species; mitigating flood risk; storing carbon and regulating water quality. The IUCN UK Peatland Programme has developed the UK Peatland Strategy 2018 - 2040, stressing the need for immediate action to protect and restore these habitats. At present, 80% of UK peatlands are in a damaged and deteriorating state.

At a local level, soil mapping shows areas within the Shropshire Hills AONB as having peaty soils present, including in the upper Clun, Stiperstones, Black Hill, Brown Clee and Catherton Common. As part of ongoing work in the Clun catchment, we have linked up with partner organisations, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Natural England, to seek opportunities to gain a better understanding of the current condition of areas in this catchment mostly of shallow peaty soils (plus some pockets of deeper peat). Evidence published by Natural England shows that these soils are currently high carbon emitters. Their value as carbon sinks could be increased if areas were re-wetted, less intensively grazed and conifer plantation cover reduced.

Shropshire Wildlife Trust have successfully secured Farming in Protected Landscapes funding for detailed eco-hydrological survey of 449 ha of land in the Clun Forest area, testing for current peat depths and overall condition or level of degradation. Their consultant's analysis will also identify specific locations where different peatland restoration measures could be implemented. Such results will be shared with landowners, and it is hoped will be a useful evidence base to inform future land management decisions and possible environmental payments for carbon storage and headwater restoration. The Shropshire Hills AONB team has been supporting this project, particularly with mapping work and landowner engagement.

In addition, an opportunity has arisen to build on the work of the FiPL funded survey and undertake similar survey work on a further 657 hectares of mapped shallow peaty soils in this catchment. This project would be funded by Natural England, as part of their Protected Sites Strategy work, of which the Clun is one of five pilot areas in England. A funding Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) is currently being developed between Natural England, the Shropshire Hills AONB team and Shropshire Wildlife Trust. The AONB team would lead on project delivery and contractor management under the MoA.

**List of Background Papers**

Project information listed on Shropshire Hills AONB website

[The AONB's ancient woods are some of our most valuable natural assets.  
\(shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk\)](http://shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk)

UK Peatland Strategy

[2018 UK Peatland Strategy DIGITAL 3.pdf \(iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org\)](http://iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org)

**Human Rights Act Appraisal**

The information in this report is compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.

**Environmental Appraisal**

The recommendation in this paper will contribute to the conservation of protected landscapes.

**Risk Management Appraisal**

Risk management has been appraised as part of the considerations of this report.

**Community / Consultations Appraisal**

The topics raised in this paper have been the subject of earlier consultations with Partnership members.

**Appendices**

None