

Report on Steward Community Woodland.

- 1) My name is Anthony Mackarel and I was asked by the Steward Woodland Community to support them in revising their Woodland Management Plan, and to spend time in the Woodland advising them of both potential management prescriptions but also best practice, and to support them in gaining greater insight in what would be required to achieve their goal of having a rich and vibrant naturally regenerating woodland.
- 2) My background has been as a Forester and Woodland Consultant and Contractor. I have a BSc in Forestry and spent many years working for the likes of The Forestry Commission, The National Small Woods Association and both private and corporate land owners. My second degree is in Countryside Management at Post Graduate level and this was completed during my time working with the National Trust as a warden. For the past ten years I have worked as a Lecturer and Programme Manager at Bicton College teaching Forestry and Arboriculture, Countryside Management and Environmental Education to students ranging from a Level 2 to Foundation Degree level.
- 3) I have visited Steward Woods on three occasions from early 2015 and have also communicated with the group working on the Management plan over the phone many times. My first meeting with the representatives of the community was to make an initial assessment of what the community needed in terms of building a robust and current management plan for the woods and also to spend time with several of the group walking the woods outlining potential management solutions to some of the issues faced in the woodland. I was at this time also given a copy of the woodland report made by Charles Dutton for the National Park concerning the woodland.
- 4) In my visiting the community and discussion with them around their plans to continue to revert the Woodland from a non-native plantation woodland to a native broadleaf woodland with the inherent benefits of increased biodiversity, amenity, recreation and educational value. The community is also focussed on using the resources provided by the woodland - food and timber for building materials and for heating and cooking to make a reduction on the impact that their lives have on the environment. In these meetings several main points came up.
 - a) The Community had a management plan for the woodlands and although this had lapsed the community were still using this to inform management. The fact that the management plan for the woodland was out of date was clearly an issue that needed immediate attention, it was also clear that the previous management plan had not been comprehensive and so was not forming a cohesive driver for the management of the woodland as a whole. Several compartments around the woodland were being actively managed with signs of good practice in terms of coppice management and low impact deer control. The aim of gradual reversion of non-native plantation forestry to native

woodland through the use of natural regeneration was taking place with plantation species regularly felled to supply the community's needs.

- b) The community decided rather than to commission me to write a management plan for the woodland that they would, with guidance, write their own management plan. This is clearly a sensible and useful undertaking for the group to do – it brings a sense of ownership and involvement ensuring the plan will have more meaning to those who will then implement the management itself. The community also decided to produce this plan using their own design rather than some of the templates widely available on line for the same reasons. The resultant plan produced by the community is now a comprehensive and robust useful working document.
 - c) The community had decided that management of the woodland would take the form of Continuous Cover Forestry, an option that is completely appropriate given the base line circumstances, conditions and aims of the Community. Some monitoring of woodland regeneration does exist however the current management plan now clearly recognises the importance of such monitoring to ensure that management prescriptions are effective.
 - d) Another factor that needed to be addressed is the carrying capacity for the woodland in its current and future management. Put another way how many people the woodland could sustain without having a negative impact on the woodland itself. As the majority of timber used by the Community both for building and for fuel wood is made up of non-native species that need to be felled in order to encourage favourable light levels for natural regeneration to thrive this would not be an issue for several years. However for future planning the Community can put in place a system to monitor resource use and therefore have a clearer picture of how much timber is required and how this might impact the woodland when projected for future years.
- 5) The independent report as commissioned by the National Park Authority compiled by Mr Charles Dutton has been an extremely useful tool for the Community to ensure that current management is both mapped correctly and in keeping with modern techniques and best practice. As this is a most comprehensive report I would like to use this as a template for many of the points that I feel are appropriate and to respond to some key pieces found with this report.
- 6) Section 1 is entitled "Impact of Current Development" and appears to be dealing with the issue of landscape impact.

1.1 The report states that when seen from Google Earth the area "gives the impression that there is an area of scattered development instead of a single traditional west-county woodland." This of course is completely the case as the report also clearly states that the area is "semi mature mixed conifer plantation" not single traditional west country woodland, so of course would certainly never appear to be so when viewed from the air. The report however is correct and you can see that there are dwellings in the wood from

aerial and satellite imagery, you are also able in the winter months with some difficulty to make out some structures from the A382.

7) Section 2 is entitled “Evidence of Harm Caused by the Current Development to the Wood”

However I was not able to find details of any evidence of “Harm Caused” in this section but of the potential of harm that may be caused.

2.1 The report highlights that when opening the canopy of a woodland, as has been done around the dwelling area, there is a potential for wind throw to occur. However as the report indicates this has not been seen to be the case with no issues of wind throw in this area. The report however does highlight an issue with wind throw away from the dwelling area where no clearing has occurred. This of course highlights the difficulty of accurately mapping incidences of predictable wind throw. The report is correct that opening areas within woodlands can cause wind patterns to shift and potentially opening up less wind firm trees to potential damage. In relation to the dwelling area this has not as yet been seen to be the case.

2.4 The report has highlighted several useful and key points here. The management plan was at this time out of date but to my understanding was still being used as a working document informing the community of an overriding plan. Thanks to this report the community now have a robust and comprehensive management plan in place.

The report also states that in the event of *Phytophthora ramorum* that it would leave the site exposed as much of the area below the dwelling would need to be felled in the event of the disease being present. The report is correct and throughout the South West, and further afield, many woodlands have been devastated by this disease and landscapes altered through enforced felling notices, some of which are within the National Park. However no signs or symptoms have been seen as yet and the current management plan details how any incidence of the disease will be dealt with.

2.5 Again the report points out that without a current management plan there is no way of knowing if protected species that may inhabit the area are being monitored for or managed for. The current management plan clearly set aside details of monitoring and management with definitive action plans for each protected species clearly set out. The report also highlights that there is “some additional concern about contamination of the water supply and the use of the various watercourses” but does not say how, where or why there might be concern. It does, however, go on to say this in the following sentence stating that there is no evidence to suggest that there is a problem with effluent discharge from soak a ways or toilets. It does state however that soak a ways drained in to the woodland would not do the trees any good, although it is not clear in what way. It also states that it might lead to tree death although again does not state how this might happen. Monitoring of tree health as highlighted by the current management plan can be used as a useful tool to flag up any potential problems ensuring that remedial work can be put in place should any issues occur. In speaking with community members I was also assured that greywater treatment systems

were adequate and appropriate so as not to be harmful to flora or fauna and that siting of compost toilets had taken in consideration proximity of water courses.

8) Section 3 & 4 Entitled - State of Woodland, General Advice on Management Issues and current condition of Woodland

In this area of the report the condition of the woodland itself is discussed, as is advice on woodland management issues, the report again highlights some interesting area of discussion. The report is clearly worried about the regeneration of the next generation of trees to grace the site at Steward Woods and highlights some very useful points. Natural Regeneration can be a lengthy and sometimes problematic management option with certain requirements for seedlings to flourish to be right. The presence of parent trees, as mentioned in the report is of course crucial, and in some areas this is seen to be a concern due to the previous planting of non native conifer species , however some areas clearly have quantities of seedlings and saplings growing. Survey data carried out in the wood in 2007/2008 showed that in fact a healthy range of species were regenerating freely and follow up data in 2014 should that regeneration was occurring on site. Sycamore, which in itself may bring issues in the future, it is seen as a naturalised tree with low associated biodiversity that will regenerate freely and has often been seen to out compete and “invade” woodlands is clearly growing freely. The current management plan highlights this issue stating that all sycamore regeneration will be utilised as firewood before trees reach an age to set seed.

There are also some areas of good Ash regeneration also. Areas of Hazel coppiced in rotation will, due to increased light levels associated with the thinning and felling of non-natives, be stimulated into seed production and will improve the potential of the species ability to regenerate in the woodland. Potentially there may be a need for some restocking with nursery grown stock in areas that are not regenerating freely. This again can be highlighted by regular monitoring and is covered in the current management plan. It may be beneficial to implement a more systematic approach to monitoring and introduce fixed point photographic monitoring to ensure regeneration is happening at the desired rate.

- 8) The report also points out issues with deer browsing and weeding within these areas. Currently deer protection is in the form of netting held with stakes in conjunction with some dead hedging, the use of cut material to protect the freshly cut felling stool coppice. Dead hedging is a completely sustainable form of deer protection and whilst not as robust as Deer Fencing it also has the advantage of providing a rich habitat in the form of deadwood, eventually rotting down to form natural beetle banks. In my observations during my visits to the woodland I was unable to see deer browsing damage in these protected coppiced areas, it was in evidence in the wider woodland suggesting that deer protection was at this time effective. Weeding newly planted and freshly seeded trees is seen to be beneficial allowing the sapling to access as much light, water and nutrients as possible to give it the best chance of survival, weeding in areas of deer population however can be detrimental for the very reason that it weeds may protect seedlings from browsing.

9) The report states that the Continuous Cover Forestry is an “unconventional silvicultural system used mainly in Europe” The report highlights quotes from several well recognised books detailing techniques used in Forestry Management dating from 1991 and 1992. These texts certainly were extremely influential in their thinking 25 years ago, fortunately knowledge, research and understanding has moved on a great deal from these times and we see less single minded forestry aimed at producing even aged non-native species solely for timber production that severely impacts our landscapes and biodiversity. As stated in the Forestry Commissions publication of 1999 what is Continuous Cover? “Continuous cover forestry is an approach to management that fits well with current requirements to manage forests for multiple objectives” and “The current attraction of continuous cover forestry lies in the belief that this approach is suited to an era of multi-purpose forestry where environmental, recreational, aesthetics and other objectives are as important as timber production.” This is of course not only in keeping with modern woodland management but also completely in keeping with the aims of the community and therefore can be seen to be the right choice of management for this area.

10) Continuous cover forestry has been utilised in many woodlands throughout the U.K. for some time, examples such as the Woodland Trusts high profile Baronscourt Estate show the multiple benefits associated with this modern form of silviculture. A system described in the Woodland Trusts paper of 2010 “Sustainable Management of Forests, Woods and Trees in the U.K.” as working with nature. Baronscourt Estate Woodlands have qualified for membership of the Forest Stewardship Council by demonstrating sustainable management using Continuous Cover Forestry systems.

11) Moving on the report does highlight an important issue that of the differing management zones with greater management occurring closer to the dwelling area than in the wider woodland – again this is addressed in the management plan and work schedule contained within it. The management plan will ensure that monitoring of natural regeneration areas to evaluate the success of this policy.

12) It is important to point out the felling licence for the woodland is current and has been agreed by the Forestry Commission.

13) Other useful points in the report include highlighting that under the Forestry Commission Woodland Improvement Grant money may well have been applied for to help improve infrastructure in the woodland if that had been a consideration – however this grant is now closed. It does however raise an important issue that may well be of use to the community in assisting in the management of their woods to look into funding possibilities for the future.

14) Again the report highlights issues mainly brought into concern from the lack of a viable and robust management system based on an overarching management plan and the implications should changes occur such as outbreak of *Phytophthora ramorum*. These issues I feel have now been addressed in the updated and fully comprehensive management plan.

15) Section 5 addresses value of the woodland including timber value which may be useful information to the community.

16) Section 6 Assesses Woodland Management in the past 5 years.

The report has detailed the management that has been carried out in the past including felling, thinning, coppicing, deer protection, the conversion of timber on site and marking of trees for future management. It states that management has been of the bare minimum. I have seen examples of current management, not mentioned in the report, such as the monitoring for species, biodiversity and regeneration, the management of invasive species, provision of boxes for protected species and the wider scope of management to include educational visits. The report again mentions the lack of management plan in this section – I believe that this issue has been sufficiently mentioned already.

17) Section 7 Disease in Larch

The report again looks at the potential for an incidence of *Phytophthora ramorum* and how the community might cope with such an occurrence. Again as previously discussed this potentially could be of major significance should the disease be found to be present in the wood. The updated Management plan has in place a process that will be called on should it be required and highlights areas for further research.

18) Section 8 Impact of Residence

Again “the very real” problem of water course pollution is mentioned but it is unclear in what form this takes.

This section also includes a table that outlines the amount of labour needed to manage the woodland in a conventional way. However It is not clear as to which Silvicultural system this refers to or if were in keeping with the aims and objectives of the woodland.

19) Section 9 Recommendations

Some recommendations in this section are appropriate to the requirements of the woodland and the woodland management aims and objectives.

20) Section 10 appears to be missing but Section 11 deals with residential need to manage woodland.

The report points out that there is no need for residential property on site in relation to the management of the woodland and I would agree that in terms of managing the woodlands there is no such requirement.

21) In conclusion

I feel that in meeting with representatives from the community that there is a real desire to manage the woodlands with care and consideration for the wider implications of habitat, biodiversity, amenity, recreation and education. There is clear evidence of this positive management having been undertaken for several years. The new woodland management plan is a robust and useful working document to inform, guide and support members of the community in managing the woodland. Where there has been a lack of attention to some aspects of management in some areas in the woodland this has been due to a lack of overarching

management planning – an issue that clearly has now been rectified. I feel that with an understanding of how the U.K.s strategic priorities, and legal obligations now lie in modern day woodland management as they relate to enhancing multi-use woodland resources that Steward Woodland Community represents a piece of this new era of woodland use. Forestry, the production of timber, is of much less concern as highlighted by Forestry Commission policy with priority now given to habitat creation and enhancement, recreation, sustainable resource management, education, landscape value to name but a few. The Government Forestry and Woodlands Policy of 2013 states that, “our priority will be management that increases the resilience of the woodland asset so that it continues to provide multiple benefits to society”. This means that alternative systems need to be put into place if our woodlands are to thrive and continue in the face of mounting environmental pressures. This requires a joined up approach to encourage people back into our woodlands so that they are no longer the reserves of woodland owners and managers but of the people who live and work in the area. Again as stated in the Government Forestry and Woodlands Policy of 2013 “A true and sustainable woodland culture needs to be built from the ground up and must be based on the needs, interests and enthusiasm of local people.” It also states that the government will “work with partners from across the sector to promote community involvement in the management of their local woodlands.” It would seem with this in mind that The Steward Woodland Community is fulfilling some of the aims of our government policy.