

The auditor's guide to managing biodiversity in woodlands

Stephen Tong, of Tilhill gives advice on how to develop the biodiversity section of an UKWAS compliant management plan

While the detail of the standard is regularly revised, there has been a consistent theme regarding the management of biodiversity in woodlands. The first requirement is to correctly identify what you have. The manager then has to produce and implement a plan which will protect and/or enhance the quality of what is already present (and of accepted value), take steps to create biodiversity where it is judged to be lacking and identify areas for biodiversity management that meet the minimum requirements of the standard.

This article is partly a retrospective, considering what has been achieved in certificated woodlands, and partly an aid for practitioners who are putting plans together for certification or preparing for the next audit. We will not dwell too much on the specifics of the current standard as the next version will be with us all too soon.

Managing Existing Biodiversity

• Identify what is present

This is where the process can start to go wrong, even in the case of designated site types, which it should be possible to pick up from the mapping information available on the internet. The information that is available can be confusing and is sometimes contradictory.

What is rather more difficult is identifying the biodiversity value of undesignated sites. In this regard, there is no substitute for knowledge and experience. You have to start from a thorough knowledge of your woodland and then apply your experience

to say what is important. The variety of sites that have higher biodiversity value is considerable and they are not always obvious (think rare ferns in a quarry or minute bryophytes on a coniferous tree trunk). It is unlikely that there will be existing knowledge externally and an ecological survey may be required to supplement the manager's input. Even that will not pick up everything, particularly if the important feature is seasonal or transitory.

• Assess what is present

Once you have decided what is present, you have to evaluate its relative importance and condition. This is not as difficult as it sounds, because there is plenty of help out there and no shortage of opinion on the importance of differing types of biodiversity and what sort of condition your site is in. There is also quite a lot of common sense involved in the assessment of condition. Once you know what makes a site special, you can form an opinion on whether those special characteristics are in a strong and stable condition, or not.

• Go beyond assessing – act on management

The next part of managing existing biodiversity involves action and this, unfortunately, is where things go most awry, even though non-compliance is a road frequently paved with good intentions.

A surprisingly large number of forest managers come to a halt after they have identified the areas to be managed for biodiversity and set down appropriate prescriptions in their management plan. After this, good intentions are frustrated by





• Overambition

There is a tendency to include everything of interest in the areas to be managed with biodiversity enhancement as the primary objective. While designated sites and defined high conservation value areas need to be included, elsewhere it can be better to define the minimum required area and concentrate on the sites which will benefit most from biodiversity-related interventions. The issue with overambition applies equally to the management prescriptions. Commit to the essentials and earn extra UKWAS plaudits for doing a bit more if you are able to.

• Monitoring Prescriptions

This is another area where you can always do more than you have put in your plan, but problems will arise if you do less. Once you have prepared a monitoring schedule that covers the essentials, in a manner that is achievable, take a copy and put it somewhere it will not languish in darkness until you are preparing for the next recertification audit.

• Inactivity

Biodiversity management is rarely urgent and may struggle to make it to the top of a manager's work schedule. By doing some of the work early in the certification cycle you will be certain of having something to demonstrate compliance when the next audit comes around.

• Inflexibility

Where biodiversity is concerned, there is a tendency to think that areas and prescriptions must remain static for the plan period. It is fine to change things about if a higher value area is found, or the management needs to change.

Has UKWAS improved biodiversity management?

It is gratifying to be able to affirm that UKWAS has undoubtedly improved the management of biodiversity in woodlands. UKWAS has led to better appraisal of the resource under management and increased the knowledge of forest managers. In many cases, this has led to foresters and owners becoming more enthusiastic about their biodiversity and taking additional measures to improve it. At the very least, UKWAS involves a system of audits and external verification which ensures that the requirements of the standard are being met. Managers' enthusiasm for UKWAS remains very mixed, but it undoubtedly provides a framework which can be supportive and helpful to practitioners who are keen on good management of biodiversity.



Creating Additional Biodiversity

As our detractors are quick to point out, there is many a first rotation conifer forest, planted on land that has been used for hill sheep grazing, which is distinctly lacking in biodiversity. In these cases, the forest manager has to find (at present) 15% of the Woodland Management Unit where management for conservation and biodiversity enhancement is the primary objective.

It has to be said that creating new areas for biodiversity is often a great deal more straightforward than the successful management of sites that already have it. Follow through the forest design process and you are likely to end up with sufficient open ground, broadleaves, retentions and diverse conifer to meet the requirement. Once selected, new sites then need to be managed and monitored in the same way as existing biodiversity sites.

Where there are problems, in this type of forest, they most commonly result from a reluctance on the part of the owner or manager to sacrifice productivity. Colonisation by bracken, etc. can also be just as much of a problem for new sites as it is on existing ones.

Some things to watch out for

There are some common difficulties that I have encountered which are worthy of consideration when preparing the biodiversity sections of a management plan. I would rate my top 4 as follows:

lack of time, distractions, lack of funding or changes of manager, to name but a few. Too many forests arrive at their recertification audits with little or no evidence of effective biodiversity management.

Other managers seem to have taken a view that identifying a biodiversity-rich area and putting it on a map confers some sort of magical protection upon it and nothing further is required. By far the most common problem, in this respect, is colonisation of sites by bracken, rhododendron or conifer regeneration, all of which may be acting to diminish or eradicate the biodiversity value of the site.

• Monitor the process

We have to monitor the condition of biodiversity sites and the effectiveness of the management prescriptions that have (hopefully) been employed to protect them. Everyone who has experience of the UKWAS audit process will be aware of how often the monitoring part can be problematic.