

## Petitioner submission of 13 October 2022

### PE1812/AAA: Protect Scotland's remaining ancient, native and semi-native woodlands and woodland floors

We thank the Committee for its research.

We urge the Committee to extend its investigations to build the solid evidence base that may help lead to genuine respect and protection for Scotland's remaining fragments of natural woodland. Will the Committee consider contacting the two National Park Authorities and pursue the 10 Local Authorities that have failed to provide responses to your enquiries?

Will the Committee also consider requesting Local Authorities and Park Authorities provide information on how many reports they have received from the public about damage to Scotland's woods and how many ancient and native woods have been damaged or lost to development with and without planning consent?

That the Scottish Government regulator, Scottish Forestry (SF), appears to shift the focus for the absence of any prosecutions on to the Procurator Fiscal (PF) is, we feel, also worthy of further, urgent, investigation by the Committee. How can the PF assess the extent of damage to native woodland if SF does not report it? What percentage of confirmed cases does SF report to the PF?

The submissions from 22 Scottish Local Authorities and SF should leave the Committee in no doubt why Scotland continues to rank as one of the most nature depleted countries on Earth and how our complacency and over consumption contributes to the 69% average decline of wildlife species across the world since 1972 (Living Planet Index 2022).

Scotland's *paper only* environmental protections sparked our petition in 2020 and the Committee's research has confirmed our deepest fears: Scotland is over exploited and unprotected. As noted in their response, while our Scottish ancient woods and all their biodiversity and beauty quietly fade into history, SF has not pursued one single prosecution for damage or unlicensed felling in Scotland's natural woods in at least 10 years. The Tree Preservation Order systems operated by local

authorities appear chaotic, ineffective and demonstrate a shocking lack of shared procedures, record keeping, quality control or evidence of awareness of the pivotal contribution Scotland's unique native woods and veteran trees make to health & wellbeing, economy & tourism, as well as climate & nature.

Our experience is in stark contrast to the evidence provided to the Committee by SF. In just two years we have reported four incidences of damage within a five-mile radius, including two cases of unlicensed felling in ancient and LEPO (long-established woodlands of plantation origin) woods, one of deliberate fire setting of acres of standing veteran trees and saplings, and one of construction of a mountain bike track in a small, rare ancient bluebell wood designated as Local Area Nature Reserve. We reported these to all relevant statutory bodies, including Police Scotland and Fire Scotland where appropriate and, currently, no action appears to have been taken to prosecute the known perpetrators.

Instead of pursuing prosecution where unlicensed felling has occurred, SF appear content to grant permission for further extensive felling in ancient woodland via their process to create a Woodland Management Plan, including sham community consultations (which we experienced in June this year).

Our own research reveals the general public rarely report incidences of damage and illegal felling because they do not know they can take action, and they fear recriminations from neighbours. Sadly, they also make assumptions that landowners, statutory authorities, and others are operating within the law and are left disenfranchised and powerless to stop the relentless exploitation and decline of our country.

We also wanted to make the Committee aware that since its last consideration of our petition, we have received correspondence indicating that a representative from SF would be in touch to arrange to meet us on site to discuss the spread of self-seeding invasive non-native conifer species from commercial plantations into native woodland. This follows on from the invitation offered by the Minister when she provided evidence on 23 March 2022. Unfortunately, we have yet to hear from SF to arrange this site visit.