

Petitioner submission of 16 October 2023

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

In the light of the Cabinet Secretary's latest submission, we urge the Committee to press on with the long fight for Scotland's remaining fragments of ancient, native and semi-native woodland and woodland floors.

Warm words are not protecting Scotland's native woods and trees.

Delivering a National Register of Ancient Woodland was an [SNP manifesto pledge in 2021](#) (pg. 70), and this pledge was carried forward to the [Programme for Government](#) in the same year (pg.65). Now it seems there is no urgency - no Register will be delivered by this Government, and no project implementation plan or basic delivery timetable is forthcoming.

Only 1-2% of Scotland's ancient woods are left standing along with a further 2-3% of native woods and yet, according to the new [2023 State of Nature Scotland report](#) (2023 SoN), only a tiny 3% of these precious fragments is in a 'favourable' condition. Most ancient and native woodland is not in 'protected' sites, but even 'protected' sites are in decline, with a 2.3% reduction of sites listed as being in favourable condition between 2007-2023. The report states the biggest threat to 'protected' sites is invasive species, with Rhododendron Ponticum and Sitka Spruce infestation highlighted as especially problematic.

The Cabinet Secretary uses the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland to provide statistics of non-native conifer infestation, yet that survey is 10 years out of date. Sitka Spruce is a profuse natural regenerator (capable of producing more than 100,000 seedlings in a single hectare according to [this Forestry Commission report](#)), and a Sitka can add over 30 ft in height in 10 years, rapidly out competing our native trees.

We are disappointed the Cabinet Secretary has provided National Forest Inventory (NFI) data for the whole of Great Britain – the UK Government has not pursued widespread conifer afforestation in England, and it does not face the scale of decline visited on Scotland by INNS rhododendron and conifer infestation. England also has a higher percentage of ancient

and native woodland, and its Courts prosecute and fine criminals who fell native woodland without a licence. Therefore, the NFI stats provided are contradicted by the new Scotland-focussed 2023 SoN Report and do not reflect the deeply sad condition of our own native woods.

Among the many tragic consequences of successive governments' forestry policies, and the vast sums of public money given to landowners to plant invasive conifers, is that our Governments' nature recovery grants are directing public money to reverse the damage done to Scotland by these monoculture forestry plantations.

The United Nations issued its [latest assessment of the impact of Invasive Non-Native Species](#) in September, stating the global economic costs exceeded \$423 billion in 2019 alone and the financial impacts of INNS have quadrupled every 10 years since the 1970s. It states: ***'The severe global threat posed by invasive alien species is underappreciated, underestimated, and often unacknowledged.'*** So it is with Scotland, and we therefore hope the Committee is indeed able to secure an INNS debate in the Scottish Parliament.

It is profoundly sad that the overwhelming majority of people resident in Scotland know so little about the land and waterways that sustain them, and the native trees on which their society was built – for centuries providing the raw material for homes, transport, tools, fuel for warmth and cooking. Scotland is now so degraded it is one of the most nature poor countries on Earth (ranking 212 out of 240 countries according to the Biodiversity Intactness Index) and according to an RSPB survey in 2019, 82% of children in the UK are unable to identify an oak leaf. This vacuum of knowledge combined with the disenfranchisement of people in communities who campaign on behalf of our country, makes our Scotland ripe for continued exploitation. That international investors continue to be facilitated to snap up huge swathes of our precious land for dodgy carbon offsets by planting vast INNS conifer plantations is, in our view, barbaric lunacy.

Legislation has thankfully tightened up recently around the issue of development in ancient woodland, but NPF4 remains weak and ambiguous for native woodland that is not identified as ancient. Also, legislation that is not enforced, and regulatory powers that are not used, as the Committee's own enquiries have established, creates an appalling illusion of protection.

Scottish Forestry officials have stated to the Committee they blame Scotland's Procurator Fiscal for not taking cases of unlicensed felling forward. Access to justice for Scotland's communities and their native trees is both unavailable and unaffordable, and the [Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland's enlightened recommendation](#) to follow the lead of dozens of other countries around the world and establish an environmental court is, we believe, essential and urgent in a climate and nature emergency.