



Restoration of PAWS Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites

By Steve Rodrick and Mike Render

The Government has adopted a new policy of encouraging the restoration of plantations on ancient woodland sites to more natural species composition. This has led to a debate on the role, if any, of conifers in these woods. There are merits in a policy of retaining some conifers.

The Government launched a new policy on Ancient and Native Woodland “Keepers of Time” last summer. This stresses the ecological, social and cultural importance of Ancient Woodland and includes a number of initiatives by which these woods can be protected, managed and enhanced in quality.

The Chilterns will have a major role to play in the delivery of this policy as it has substantial total areas and higher than national average percentages of Ancient Woodland, this includes both Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland (ASNW) and Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS). The area of Ancient Woodland is approximately 56% of all woodland in the Chilterns AONB (approx 17,400 ha).

Ancient woodland type	Area (ha)	% of all ancient woodland
Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland	5,599	57.5
Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites	4,134	42.5
All Ancient Woodland	9,733	100.0

Source: M Render unpublished PhD thesis (2004)

One of the actions proposed, and that which has gained most publicity, is the restoration of PAWS to more natural composition principally by the replacement of conifers with broadleaves. This could have a significant impact on the woodland of the Chilterns as over 4,100 hectares have been classified as PAWS. There is, however, a danger that conifers will be 'demonised' leading to pressure for their complete and premature removal, even where there may be a case for their retention. The media coverage of the new policy presented just such a picture.

In terms of promoting biodiversity, national policy is to favour locally native species. The only native conifers to Britain are Scots Pine, Juniper and Yew; the latter two are indigenous to

the Chilterns but are not generally plantation species, indeed juniper does not form a 'tree' in the normal sense of the word. The conifers within PAWS in the Chilterns are therefore planted exotic species or those that have arisen from natural regeneration of originally planted stock.

The danger is that all conifers will be removed from all ancient woodlands sites, with no weight given to any benefits of retention. The AW policy urges caution, but this is not clear from the way the policy has reported in the press. There are situations where there may be a case for keeping some conifers, in the Chilterns.

The following list provides possible criteria for conifer retention in ancient woodlands:

- a** Where there are only a small number of trees which have lost the appearance of a plantation (i.e. the rows are no longer visible), but which provide structural diversity and visual amenity.
- b** Where selective felling would diminish the visual and environmental impact of the plantation, but retain its other desirable qualities.
- c** Where there is no likelihood of significant natural regeneration.
- d** Where the conifers are mature and provide a valued landscape feature or enhance visual amenity, especially in the winter.
- e** Where there are accepted biodiversity benefits from retention, e.g. Firecrests/Crossbills.
- f** Where there are significant social or cultural associations.
- g** Where there is the likelihood of damage to archaeological sites resulting from felling and/or extraction.
- h** Where the conifer crop is of high quality and will produce a valuable timber harvest.

We support the overall policy aim of restoring plantations on ancient woodland sites to more natural composition.