



Deadwood

The importance of deadwood has been in the news recently. Natural woods should be full of the stuff, with perhaps a third or more of the trees dead, dying and fallen. Many species depend on decay, so if nature conservation is an aim, which it should be in any sustainably managed wood, leaving deadwood is vital for the survival of these decomposers through to the rest of the food chain.

All sizes of standing and fallen dead wood are of value for wildlife. In general terms the larger the log or standing snag (a tree that has lost its branches) is, the better it is; the species of dead tree is much less important. However the woodland owner and manager must consider public (and private) safety and judge the level of risk of leaving deadwood. This may require regular inspection at a suitable time of year to assess trees; this helps satisfy the duty of care for insurance purposes. It is important to consider where dead wood is left and the chance of it falling on cars, passers by or buildings. Key trees to consider are on boundaries, near buildings or roads. Footpaths and bridleways should be kept clear of obstructions, such as fallen trees and branches, but these can be cut and moved out of the way.

It is now normal to leave brash lying in commercially managed woods, as it is costly and unnecessary to remove. Burning does even more harm to neighbouring trees, to the soil and ground vegetation such as bluebells. Fire sites can remain visible with different vegetation, often mosses, for many years. It is also normal to leave a certain amount of deadwood in non commercial woodland. The Woodland Trust, Wildlife Trusts, National Trust and Forest Enterprise would all do this, where appropriate, and have policies in place to consider public safety.

Some people worry that fungi living on deadwood will spread disease to living trees, the opposite is normally the case. Fungi and bacteria are vital to the ecosystem, breaking down plant matter and recycling nutrients into the soil so that plants can then reuse it. These species also compete with harmful fungi,



Fungi on a decaying log

such as honey fungus, making it less likely to attack living trees. Disease is more likely to spread in “clean and tidy” woods where the normal decomposers are absent.

If it is a cost operation to move logs from the site and they are not in the way why not leave them where they are to decay naturally. This provides food for fungi, insects and many other invertebrates (the decomposers) which are the base of the food chain. It also provides cover and nest sites. It is not essential to clear up windblown trees unless there is a value or use for this material. It is often better to fell living trees for this purpose, which allows other trees space to develop and opens up the canopy to the benefit of ground flora. Remember this work may require a felling licence!

Dead branches on old trees are another important source of dead wood. Hollowing out old pollards and other veteran trees are extremely valuable for rare insects, bats, owls, woodpeckers and fungi. These ancient trees require special care and should be retained for as long as possible, provided that they can be considered safe.

Re-pollarding may help reduce risk and prolong the life of the tree but specialist advice and assistance with tree surgery may be needed. Old trees only respond well to this treatment if they have plenty of light and it may be sensible to carry out this work gradually in stages to ensure the trees survival.