



Supported by the Neroche Scheme and the Blackdown Hills AONB

Blackdown Hills wood/fuel cluster survey A survey and report produced with funding from the BH AONB and supported by the Neroche Scheme and the Forestry Commission

CONTENTS

- History and background
- Aims and objectives
- Survey and conclusions
- Recommendations

HISTORY

At a Woodland Group meeting with representatives from the Blackdown Hills Woodland Association, East Devon and Blackdown Hills AONB's, the Forestry Commission and the Neroche Scheme, the discussion highlighted the need for information on small private owned woodlands, in particular relating to wood fuel in the area, suggesting that there was a market and that the supply was unknown. An idea was put forward that there may be a need for a central point where the small producer / owner with limited equipment / knowledge could market timber and cord wood / thinnings maybe in exchange for logs in return.

BACKGROUND

Apart from the big estates such as the Forestry Commission and a few others there is a considerable amount of smaller woods. It was felt that this survey should concentrate on these woods of less than 50 acres (10 hectares) because they would be less likely to be commercially managed. On the Blackdowns there is historically a patchwork of small farms and small holdings with most having a piece of woodland or wooded area. There is also a growing number of woods being bought for leisure activities with owners not experienced in the management of woods but wanting to learn about management and the benefits of some of the resources in their ownership.

THE AIMS OF THE SURVEY

This survey was designed to gather evidence, as a precursor to a larger proposal for support through Making it Local later in the year. The BHWA was conceived to support all those involved in woodland and timber industries in the Blackdown Hills and surrounding areas, while considering ways the association can help woodland owners to manage their woods better and develop a more sustainable and good quality supply of fire wood. However without this survey it would have been impossible to gauge how many owners would be interested in such an initiative.

OBJECTIVES

This survey's objective was to visit a minimum of 30 and up to a maximum of 50 owners with specific questions designed to find out the aspirations of small woodland owners in the Blackdown Hills. This data now gathered and analysed should be invaluable in determining the willingness or not of the owners to be involved in such a scheme. It is hoped that this survey will be of immense use not only to the future project already mentioned but help the long-term economic benefit of the community and make a contribution to local employment.

THE SURVEY

The survey was carried out in three separate areas; the north west end of the Blackdown Hills, the central and the south eastern end, after eliminating the FC Estate and the other woodlands of over 50 acres. Some owners however did not want their names to be included and some did not want to be involved at all. The survey is still of value even if some responses are anonymous. The questions had to be short, 12 in all with the questioner spending as much time as the wood owner would allow, sometimes having to go back several times to find the owner in. Over 300 miles were covered over the course of three weeks and 58 owners interviewed, with the questions designed to maximize the information received. One of the most surprising things found during the survey was that virtually every farm had a small piece of woodland somewhere on the farm, but it was decided not to register anything less than 4 acres as it was thought that below this it was not sustainable.

Although this is not a scientific survey and is purely random it does show up some anomalies which can be seen in the conclusions.



WELLINGTON MONUMENT

J GREENSHIELDS



BLACKDOWN WOODLAND

J GREENSHIELDS

Questions used in the survey

IS YOUR WOODLAND?

WET
STEEP

HAS IT GOT?

A POND
GOOD ACCESS
BAD ACCESS
PUBLIC ACCESS

IS YOUR WOOD?

MANAGED
GRAZED

CAN WE USE YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS IN THIS SURVEY?

WHAT IS THE?

SIZE
MAIN SPECIES
OLDEST TREE

DO YOU?

BURN LOGS
CUT YOUR OWN
BUY IN

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE INFORMED OF ANY FUTURE WOOD FUEL GROUP?

CONCLUSIONS

46 owners answered all the questions.

It was striking that from the 46 owners 32 burnt logs in varying degrees and 28 used their own wood. Only 13 owners did not burn logs at all.

47 % did not want to be informed of any future wood fuel group, the main reason given was that they were happy as they were! This group is mainly made up of the owners that actively manage their woods and are burning their own logs. It has to be said that we are not talking of large amounts of fuel . All the 28 own users were only using the fuel in wood burners or open fires mainly in the winter, and only one was using wood as a central heating fuel.

There is a point where woodland is too small for substantial amounts of extraction and will only sustain small personal quantities. In our experience of managing woodland for wood fuel we have come up with a formula, it makes a difference what type of woodland it is but most of the woods on the Blackdowns Hills are mixed and between 50 and 150 years old. As a general principle and leaving out mature trees, just thinning 15 cm diameter and below and dead wooding ,one acre will produce a quarter to half a tonne per annum depending on species . So the smaller the wood the more likely that the owners would be interested in joining some kind of co-op, but they will have negative fuel equity in most cases; i.e. they would be paying for more logs than they sell.

The average size in this survey was 17 acres, which should produce a minimum of 2 tonnes per year if managed correctly, and this should sustain average private consumption. One woodland owner with a wood of 10 acres uses 2 tonnes per year in one wood burner and one open fire for approx 5.5 months of the year, and has been for the past 15 years! That is sustainable!

We have to be careful to resist the urge to extract every piece of fallen wood from our woodland as dead and dying trees are home to a large range of wildlife such as bats, birds , insects , fungi etc. Also if we take all the 15 cm and below saplings in the first year we will have nothing to follow so there will have to be a balance.

It was interesting to find a large number of old trees over 200 years with other trees of much later germination growing amongst them , suggesting that the younger trees were planted or were a consequence of regeneration .The larger trees being mostly on boundaries or hedge banks. The survey revealed just under 50% of the woods had trees in them over 100 years old . The main species were not surprisingly Oak and Ash, with over 50 % coverage and Beech and Hazel just below 25 %, unfortunately there was not time to list all species.

One of the questions concerned access to help in assessing the way forward, with 22 with good access and 17 with bad access (and some were very bad). Nearly every wood had a pond in it somewhere which shows the abundance of wildlife habitat in The Blackdown Hills .

If one 4 bedroom house with an up to date (2007) fitted wood fuel heating uses 12-18 tons of logs per year using a 16 kW burner, and the cost is £100-£130 per tonne that is £1,600 per year .With that calculation the house would need in excess of 72 acres, and in East Devon there already are some 70kw boilers which will need 100 tonnes per year which if coming from established woodland will need a minimum of 250 acres to sustain them!

To sum up it seems in this survey at least that the smallest woods would be the obvious contenders for a wood fuel group, but because of the size of these woods they will not have much to offer in the long term.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations here are based on our experience of 18 years of managing woodland for wood fuel and the information in this survey.

We suggest that it would be useful to have some kind of quality controlled log / wood fuel group, but that it would have to involve some of the larger estates and woodland owners and existing log producers and contractors . The small woods have tremendous wildlife diversity so they should not be over exploited by gathering every scrap of wood from them ,which may happen if the owners try to achieve too much extraction.

With nearly half of the woods in this survey having bad access for machinery it seems that we will have to turn to the larger woods with good access and good internal tracks . This is not to say that the smaller woods can't contribute from time to time but they could not be relied upon for a continuous supply .

There is a danger if such a scheme got off the ground that it might step on the toes of the existing group of log sellers and contractors no matter how small they are . The next step should be to approach some of the larger existing wood fuel sellers and contractors asking if they are running at full capacity, because if they are then there is certainly scope for this scheme. However if they are not then it would be more cost effective to help those log producers and contractors to expand and perhaps work together as a group with a co-ordinator.

It would not seem to be cost effective to collect cord wood in small quantities and the lower limit would be 10 tonnes in a 50 mile radius of the depot and it would have to be on the roadside .The cost of getting it to the road side is usually around £8 per tonne .The approx cost of wood at the roadside at this time is from £24 per tonne to £30 per tonne with the haulage cost on top usually £6 to £8 a tonne, and it would be very costly for someone to set up from scratch.

- We think that some sort of group / co op would be very useful but that it must bring in the existing contractors and larger wood owners as well as bringing some smaller woods into management .
- This would still keep the character of the small woodlands on the Blackdowns and help existing businesses to expand (perhaps this could be a role for the BHWA or linking up with the East Devon AONB / Silvanus etc).
- The best way perhaps in preventing the “over management “ of the smaller woods is to suggest to the owner that a percentage should not be managed to encourage wildlife, say 20% .
- There needs to be some sort of conduit to get contractors and owners in touch (already some progress with the BHWA web site) but this needs to be expanded, perhaps with an active co-ordinator .
- If contractors join the group they need to be in some way quality controlled , and also the woodland owners monitored and advised on the extent of extraction that would suit their woodland.
- The survey shows that the smallest of woods are best left or at least only used for small private fuel supply .
- All those involved in Woodlands on the Blackdown hills will have to think about planting in the very near future, with the increased pressures from more wood burning units we are in danger of losing some of the resources we have.



John and the team would very much like to thank all the woodland owners that took part in this survey and we fully understand why some did not want their names used.

We would also like to thank the Neroche Scheme , The Blackdown Hills AONB and the Forestry Commission for their support.

- John Greenshields has been farming in the Blackdown hills for over 35 years and manages 150 acres of woodland in his ownership and 200 acres for clients.
- For the past 15 years the farm has been using wood fuel from the farms woodland to fuel three central heating units using 30 to 35 tonnes a year.
- He also advises other woodland owners on managing woodland for wood fuel as well as other sustainable fuels.