

Living With Trees - Case Study

Doddington North Moor <http://www.doddingtonnorthforest.com/home>

How hard can it be to plant trees? It can, quite literally, be an uphill struggle in England.

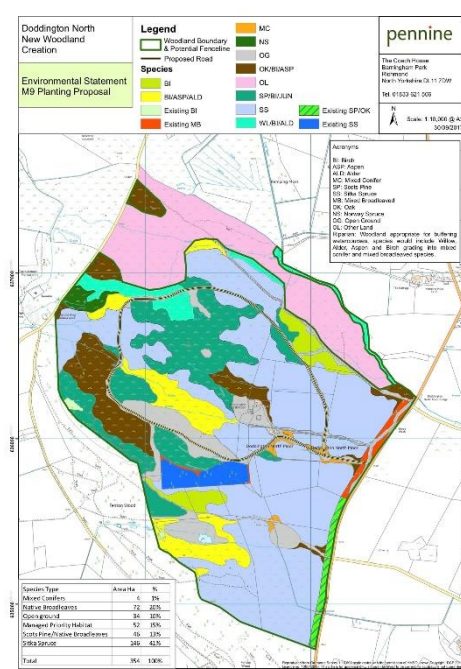
We are desperately short of trees, woods and forests in England, we import most of our timber, we have national targets (albeit unambitious) to increase tree cover, and yet there can be a strange official presumption against trees.

The problem is, we have grown accustomed to extensive open habitats, such as heathland, moorland, rough grazing, despite the fact they are ecological anomalies in our temperate climate – left to nature most of our land would be cloaked in trees. Disturbing this status quo can be challenging.

Enter Andy Howard. One of his clients wanted to invest long-term in upland forestry, bought the land at Doddington North Moor, and they embarked on getting planting approval for the largest productive plantation in England for decades. In Scotland this can take just 8 to 10 months. In Northumberland it took over 2 years and turned into a personal crusade for Andy to get the right trees planted in the right place.



Much of the proposed 354ha scheme was within the Moorland Line and designated as ‘upland heathland’, a Priority Habitat which should not be planted over. But Andy challenged this blanket designation with an environmental statement showing that the land was far from just upland heathland and more of a mixture of habitats.






Natural England’s ‘Discretionary Advice Service’ carried out their own ecological survey and likewise revealed a much richer and more interesting mosaic of habitats – lowland raised mire, lowland wet and dry heath, lowland acid grassland and wet woodland – which formed the basis of a set of ‘traffic light’ principles to inform conservation and planting.

As a result, the genuinely high priority ‘red’ habitats are being restored (eg. in the mires by removal of rhododendron and trees); the intermediate ‘amber’ zones are still priority habitat and are being maintained, including low density planting of native trees (eg. pine, oak and birch); the remaining ‘green’ zones are of very low conservation interest and can be planted with productive conifers. In the end, there has actually been an increase in the area and type of genuine priority habitat.

There is still room for the commercially productive core of the project – some 42% of the scheme is Sitka spruce – but this is far lower than some upland plantations. The Sitka is down on the lower land, away from the priority habitats and off the skyline (a concern of the nearby Northumberland National Park).

Set of Principles

The document has been written in a non-technical picture – based format that will help guide the development of a planting scheme for a productive woodland application to the Forestry Commission for Doddington Moor North. The document is not intended as a template for other sites. It includes a set of principles specifically designed for this site and devised around an easily accessible and understandable red-amber-green 'traffic light' model as follows:

-  red – areas of no tree planting where the focus is on priority BAP habitat protection, restoration and enhancement. This includes recommendations for specific conservation actions (e.g. invasive Rhododendron and tree clearance in the very rare lowland raised mire habitats).
-  amber – the intermediate 'thinking zone' in some priority BAP habitats where carefully designed, lower density native tree planting would naturally fit into the landscape in a way that still maintains the BAP features (e.g. lowland heathland as a continuous understorey to open indigenous tree planting specifications of birch, oak, etc.). This includes specifications and protocols for the tree planting species mixes, densities and methodologies such that potential impacts on BAP features (e.g. disturbance by planting \ felling activities and related machinery access, hydrological changes, shading effects) are dealt with.
-  green – priority areas for commercial sitka spruce planting in areas of very low BAP interest (e.g. improved and semi-improved sheep grazing pastures, gorse scrub, rush vegetation, etc.).



Aerial photo of northern boundary of Doddington Moor North with schematic representation of 'red – amber – green' traffic light model to BAP habitats and tree planting options

Local people have long memories and don't want 'another Kielder' – more monocultural blots on the landscape. Andy has taken the trouble, at local meetings and events, to explain how modern forestry has to be much more diverse and closely suited to the land these days. This scheme also includes new tracks and access for the public.

When the land was acquired the odds were against getting planting approval, so the FC's Woodland Creation Planning Grant was a crucial element in enabling the project, by reducing the risk and cost of the long planning process. The owner's investment was also supplemented by the FC's innovative Woodland Carbon Fund, the Woodland Carbon Code and inheritance tax allowance.

So in the end everyone has gained something – the owner has a viable investment; a productive forest will yield the wood we need; priority habitats are improved; planting targets

get a boost; the local public enjoy a more diverse landscape; Andy realises his vision for modern upland forestry.

This project has challenged assumptions about landscape, conservation and forestry; by carefully addressing all these concerns, it has shown a more creative way to establish forests, where the forest fits the land.

