WOODLAND HABITAT NETWORKS IN WALES

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Trees and forests play an important role in conserving biodiversity, providing a patchwork of wildlife rich habitats and forming the building blocks for an ecologically sustainable landscape. In common with many countries, human influence has been profound and forest cover in Wales has become highly fragmented and much reduced in extent, declining from the 'wildwood' which covered the bulk of the countryside to approximately 11% today. Although woodland cover has recently increased, many woods remain very small in scale and isolated from each other.

The fragmentation of woodland habitat into smaller isolated patches poses one of the key threats to forest biodiversity. This process reduces the total amount of habitat area (and particularly core habitat) and increases patch isolation. The reduction in area may lead to increased local extinctions, while increased isolation may cause a reduction in the exchange of individuals between isolated patches, threatening their long-term viability. Climate change and the intensification of land uses may serve to exacerbate these effects.

The negative impacts of fragmentation are now recognised within forestry and conservation strategies, and there is much interest in developing habitat networks to provide a possible solution. Habitat networks are intended to reverse the deleterious effects of fragmentation by expanding and linking existing habitat to provide larger functional networks, which are capable of sustaining a greater biodiversity. Habitat network strategies place particular emphasis on the development of strategic plans for the protection, management, restoration and re-creation/creation (including farm woodlands) of habitats at larger spatial scales.

