

Research Summary: Local perceptions of land management in high-value conservation sites

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Background:

This research note summarises research undertaken with local residents and woodland visitors in rural Argyll. It outlines how residents and visitors describe how they use and understand woodlands and indicates their perspectives on woodland management options for woodlands with a high conservation value. The focus of this research note is a woodland area on the west coast of Scotland with conservation designations, but the findings will be of wider interest to those managing woodlands for multiple benefits for people and nature.

Aim:

The aim of this research was to understand how people describe the benefits they receive from woodlands with a high conservation value, to gain insight about perceptions of biodiversity and how such conservation value might enhance people's understanding and use of woodlands. This research focused on woodland habitats that are important for non-charismatic species such as mosses (bryophytes) and lichens, to consider how people perceive forest management initiatives that focus on improving biodiversity.

Research question:

Our research question was: how do people perceive the conservation value of woodlands, and what does this imply for management of high-value conservation sites?

Research method:

The woodlands in this study were selected because of their remote location and high conservation value, as indicated by national and international conservation designations. The habitats and species for which the woodlands receive their conservation status are difficult to identify (e.g. lichens) for those without specialist training and some of the designations require conflicting management actions (e.g. to create open spaces to encourage butterflies, or allow for natural tree regeneration). Local residents and day visitors are not necessarily aware of the ecological importance of the woodlands, and land managers have to balance competing habitat needs.

We conducted interviews with 17 local residents and woodland visitors in the surrounding area of the two woodlands. We asked open questions about their perceptions of the woodlands, whether and how they used the woodland, and their perspectives on how they feel the area should be managed. We then analysed people's responses and identified common themes and core issues addressed by interviewees.

Findings:

- People expressed a broad sense of biodiversity as a good and felt that access to more information about the conservation value of the habitats would encourage greater respect for nature. When asked if this would enhance their own understanding of the value of the woodlands, respondents were interested, but undecided.
- Visitors and residents emphasised the importance of the woodlands for recreational benefits, such as going for a walk, enjoying scenery, and providing a space of tranquillity.
- Interviewees were keen to increase access: paths, signposts, trails and site information were all highlighted as important factors in encouraging greater use of the woodland.
- Concerns were expressed about barriers to access, including areas where natural regrowth made the woodland feel overgrown and hard to navigate through.
- Local residents in particular attached value to opportunities to support the local economy, whether through direct job creation, or increasing visitor numbers and thereby supporting local tourism businesses.
- Economic opportunities were often discussed in relation to broader concerns about sustaining rural populations.
- The historical role of humans in the development of woodland landscapes was important to people's sense of place. A desire to increase economic opportunities from the woodland was related to knowledge of local cultural histories, including previous management practices that created direct employment opportunities.

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- Calls for increasing visitor numbers and use of the woodlands often came with caveat that such growth should be within (unspecified) limits.
- Recognisable flora (distinctive broadleaf trees) and fauna (pine marten, red squirrel, butterflies) received more attention than less charismatic species (lichens, bryophytes).
- Participants identified the importance of managing the woodland for multiple benefits, identifying environmental, economic and social opportunities.
- Interviewees highlighted the importance of generating and exploiting social and economic benefits from the woodland, rather than focusing exclusively on supporting conservation aims.
- Some interviewees felt that existing management systems favour one outcome (e.g. economic benefit; conservation; or recreation) and indicated a preference for managing woodlands for multiple uses e.g. integrating recreation within forests by developing walking trails.

Discussion:

The challenge of managing woodlands for multiple benefits is well-known. Local residents and visitors acknowledged this difficulty. Research participants were keen to increase access to the woodlands, and generally supportive of ecological conservation aims. They valued the opportunity to enjoy nature for recreational and aesthetic purposes.

People sensed that increasing visitor numbers to areas of high conservation value is a way to increase the benefits received from woodlands. Interviewees saw increasing numbers as a way to improve people's understanding and appreciation of nature – and a means of enhancing the local economy. Participants expressed support for developing facilities such as walking trails to encourage more visitors, thereby increasing the value of the woodland both to the visitor and to the local economy.

There was a strong sense that nature is not separate from people: people are an integral part of the ecosystem that have shaped land use throughout history. Narratives of historic land use were frequently cited as examples of how humans have always interacted with the woodlands. Local participants drew on these narratives to articulate a desire for woodlands to be managed for delivery of social/aesthetic and economic benefits. These were often felt to be more important than conservation aims alone.

Participants are aware of the tensions about the challenges of managing woodlands for conservation: people expressed a desire to make the woodlands 'useful,' through recreation, timber production and creating economic opportunity. Yet this was balanced with an awareness that some of the woodland's value is the quietness and rare species and habitats, and thus that pressure to increase the use of the woodland might reduce some of its value. Acknowledging such tensions in information provision and discussions with stakeholders can help build trust and understanding about management decisions.

These findings highlight the importance of local knowledge in managing woodlands with conservation designations, as local communities seek to gain benefits from the woodlands beyond their protected status. In remote areas in particular, opportunities to support local economies are highly valued. High quality engagement with residents and stakeholders can give land managers an enhanced understanding of woodland history and local context. Working with residents can also help to identify potential additional benefits that can be created from woodlands in a way that contributes to more sustainable rural areas.

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Further information:

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