

The Sunart Oakwoods

A Guide to their Sustainable Management



Loch Sunart and its oakwoods

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This guide was launched at a public meeting at Strontian High School on 4.10.2002



Funded with the contribution of the
LIFE Financial Instrument of the
European Community

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A straightforward guide to understanding and managing the oakwoods in the Loch Sunart area.

Aimed at local woodland owners, their advisers, and others interested in a sustainable future for the Sunart woodlands.



Oakwoods at Beasdale

Guide layout

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Further Reading

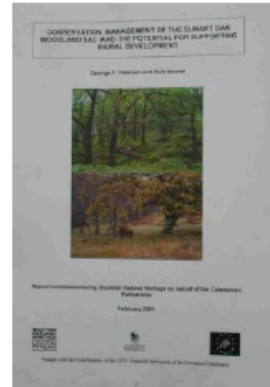
Summary of demonstration site details and contacts

Financial incentives for management

Why this Guide?

A detailed study was carried out by woodland consultants George Peterken and Rick Worrell in 2001, (a 100 page report is available on loan from the project office) and their report contains maps of the study area. There are about 3000ha of broadleaved woodlands on the margins of Loch Sunart, occupying some 12% of the land area. The study area also contains approximately 5000 ha of conifer forest. At 33% total woodland cover, this is a heavily wooded region for Scotland, being double the national average.

Sunart contains one of the most important concentrations of Atlantic oakwoods in Europe, and much of the woodland area has been designated a Special Area of Conservation in recognition of this. The mild wet climate is beneficial in allowing a rich assemblage of ferns, flowering plants, and particularly the lower plants of mosses, liverworts, lichens and fungi to flourish. The SAC designation places a responsibility on us all to look after this historic resource for future generations.



The broadleaved woodlands of western Scotland, many of which have natural origins, originating when woodland colonised the land after the glaciers retreated some 12000 years ago. The same woodlands have also had a very long history of use by man, and our role in protecting and working the Sunart oakwoods into the 21st C is crucial. The duty of the statutory agencies is to ensure that this woodland resource is passed on in favourable condition.

Although some important woods eg Glencripesdale ashwood, Arriundle oakwood or Salen oakwood are publicly owned and managed by SNH or the FC, many of the high quality woodlands (including other SSSIs) are in private ownership. The actions of the private owners, and the land-use decisions they make, will perhaps be the most significant influences on the future character of those woodlands.

This guide has been produced by SNH and FC to help local woodland owners and their advisers to make better informed decisions about future stewardship of the Sunart oakwoods. Other people interested in the future of these woods will also find the booklet helpful in understanding the character of the woodlands. The staff of the Sunart Oakwoods Project are available to give advice and to help you make the right decisions for the woodlands. Later in the guide are some brief details of grant schemes which may be available to help finance any work necessary.

Expansion of the Sunart woodlands, eastwards into Glen Tarbert and northwards along Loch Shiel, is a long term ambition, with new planting already under-way contributing to an enhanced overall network of forests and open-ground habitats. Expansion of native woodlands in both directions would create linkages to the existing native pinewoods in Ardgour and at Glenfinnan. However in the short term the main aim of the project is to encourage good management, or stewardship, of the existing native woodlands around Loch Sunart, and the conversion of mixed and underplanted woods to predominantly native woods. This guide is designed to help in that work.

Proposed Stewardship Models

The advice in this guide is centred on a set of five distinct models of stewardship - five different options for the future management of the woodlands. The proposed names for these **stewardship models**, (together with the fuller name used as management models in the Peterken/Worrell report) are:

- **Ancient Oak Forest** (*Long-rotation high forest model*)
- **Native Timber Stands** (*Standard-rotation high forest model*)
- **Coppice** (*Coppice model*)
- **Wood Pasture** (*Wood pasture model*)
- **Natural Reserves** (*Minimum intervention model*)

Each model has its own characteristics, advantages and disadvantages – and all models except **Natural Reserves** involve some timber production. Not all the existing woods are suitable for entry to all of those options, so you need to know which features indicate which model is likely to be suitable. The aim of this guide is to help you understand the models, and lead you to the right choices for your woods. (*For further details of silviculture, and for the theory behind these models – see the consultants report*).

It will become obvious that some models are more applicable than others, and in no way will there be an equal split between them in future. Neither will the model most used in the past, ie coppicing, be most appropriate for the future management of the majority of the woods.

Woods can change model over a long period, eg from **Wood Pasture** to **Ancient Oak Forest** by removing livestock grazing at some time in the future. However other models need continuity to be effective and there should not be frequent changes of direction. This particularly applies to the **Natural Reserves** - once selected and 'set up' (eg by removing sources of rhododendron seed), nature should be allowed to develop relatively undisturbed in these woodlands.



There can of course be several models running within one ownership.

The minimum basis for selecting which model to use is the 'stand' - a relatively uniform area of woodland with the same history and characteristics. A stand could be any area, of from say, a quarter hectare, up to a unit of tens of hectares.

A stand of single stemmed mature oak

It is not intended to predict the future split of model types across the project area, as each owner should make their own decisions, helped by advisers and guided by the agencies.

Broad principles which are likely to apply in selecting a model are as follows:

- **Coppicing** may have been historically important, but is no longer appropriate as the main management method, for reasons discussed later. So, the area devoted to the **Coppice** model is not expected to be large, especially in oak.
- **The nature conservation interest** of the Sunart broadleaved woodlands is very high, as has been briefly explained above, hence the European designations. Therefore it is expected that nature be given a lot of scope in developing these woodlands naturally, despite the intensive past management which many of the woodlands went through.
- **Natural features** are most likely to be well developed in **Ancient Oak Forest**, and even more so in the **Natural Reserves** - (the distinction between them is discussed below). It is expected that substantial areas be put into the **Ancient Oak Forest** model, and a lesser but significant area into more or less permanent **Natural Reserves**.
- **Woodland types:** the Sunart 'oakwoods' in fact consist of a variety of woodland types, and not just oakwoods. These include especially the ash/elm woods, coastal hazel woods, upland birchwoods, and wet woodlands with alder and willows. Also it is true that many stands of oak were actually planted in the 18th and 19thC during a period of high monetary value for oak products. Some pine, larch, spruce and other European species were also planted into some of the oakwoods since the 1800s. Some of the planted oakwoods may develop into more mixed types in due course, for example with a higher proportion of ash, alder or birch. Natural woodlands will gradually develop a species mix, both of trees and other plants, that suit the soils and climate of that site.
an old alder tree
- **Stewardship models** will be the focus of this guide, rather than dealing with individual ecological woodland types. It will also be found that the models, although designed primarily with oak woodland types in mind, also apply to the other woodland ecotypes, with some modifications. The applicability of any model for other non-oak woodland types will be dealt with under that model.
- **Economics:** Finally, it is suggested that there is in practice little financial gain to be made from managing any of these woodlands, for reasons of poor access, difficult terrain, slow growth and other physical factors. Grants are available for all model types to help owners offset costs. The choice between models should therefore be made on the intrinsic merits of a woodland and its natural features, and not on financial criteria as used in other forms of land-use.

