

# Sustainable Forestry

## Scotland's Native woods

### A brief introduction

Unlike commercial plantations of trees brought here for their fast-growing qualities, a native wood comprises species which naturally colonised Scotland over thousands of years.

These woods are a stunning mix of trees, shrubs, plants and associated wildlife which perfectly complement the geography and climate of wherever they grow.

After the last glacial period destroyed vast areas of ancient woodland, remnant seeds began to take root. Different species became established over thousands of years, adapting to the climatic conditions.

On the Western extreme of the vast Boreal forests which stretch from the west coast of Scotland to Russia, Scotland's native woods have evolved their own ecology. Cut off by the sea from the European continent they are distinctive and unique.

By around 4,000 years ago, most of the country was covered by magnificent woods of Scots pine, oak, ash, hazel, birch, rowan, willow, alder and aspen – each differing in character according to location and climate, and each providing shelter for a huge diversity of species suited to its particular environment.

The forests were a rich resource for early human inhabitants - bands of hunter gatherers who arrived between 8,000 and 9,000 years ago, were quick to make use of the woodland landscape for shelter, fuel, wooden tools and food.

The Neolithic period (New Stone Age) brought more sophisticated methods of exploiting the forest: the stone-headed axe, together with the use of fire, were effective in felling trees to clear space for crops and grazing land. Animals grazing on young saplings added to the process and by the time the Romans arrived, nearly 2000 years ago, much of the country had been practically cleared of forest.

The spread of agriculture over the centuries saw further large areas of woodland cut down or burned to create farmland. Forests which were once home to the bear, elk, lynx and boar were reduced to a few remnants. The native forest probably reached its greatest extent 4,000 years ago, today it covers only 4% of land area. The arrival of man transformed Scotland's landscape.

This loss of Scotland's native woods continued until well after the Second World War.

The formation of the Forestry Commission in 1919 to ensure Britain never ran short of timber again changed the emphasis of forestry to the creation of non-native plantations, often where native woods had once stood.

Legislation and government incentive schemes introduced during the 1980s and 1990s started to encourage a variety of tree species, ages and open spaces. Today, the value of native woods is fully recognised and a better balance is sought between commercial forestry and native woodland regeneration. Many forest remnants are being 'joined up', to create habitat networks with functioning ecosystems creating improved landscapes and new opportunities for recreation and community businesses.

There is now a growing movement from conservationists, communities and government to protect special woods of high conservation value, restore our ancient forests and create new native woods. This approach helps to develop the social, economic and environmental benefits that native woodland provide and enhance the rich diversity of life they support.