

Case Study



Coppicing of riverside Alders

Summary

Coppicing and stock fencing has improved riverbank habitat on significant lengths of river in the Shropshire Hills, benefiting rare freshwater species, improving water quality, and checking alder *Phytophthora* disease. Timber from every site coppiced has found an economic use, mostly as firewood, but a new business is also being established by a local farmer using alder commercially for flooring.

What has been done

Building on earlier work in the Clun Valley, the AONB's Blue Remembered Hills project has from 2003-2007 supported coppicing of riverside alders at 42 sites in the catchments of the rivers Clun, Teme, Kemp, Corve and Onny. Alder-lined rivers and streams are a characteristic feature of the Shropshire Hills landscape, and traditionally alders were coppiced to make charcoal and clogs. Since this demand stopped and alders have been left un-cut, riverside habitats have deteriorated as ground vegetation becomes shaded out. The healthy invertebrate fauna on which many freshwater species depend is reduced. Bare ground coupled with uncontrolled stock access allows soil to wash into the rivers causing siltation of gravel beds valuable for spawning salmonid fish and for important species such as freshwater crayfish and pearl mussel. Most of the work has been carried out in the catchments of the River Clun - a European Special Area of Conservation (SAC), and the River Teme - a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Alder *Phytophthora* disease is water-borne and widespread, with almost 100% of trees dead at some sites. Dead trees get washed out by floods, eroding banks and causing obstructions and damage downstream. Coppicing is the only known means of controlling the disease.

The project officer has identified suitable sites and worked closely with landowners to develop and implement management plans. Typically 50-80% of alders are coppiced, and often fencing has been funded through other schemes such as the Environmentally Sensitive Area grants and Catchment Sensitive Farming. River-based community events have raised awareness of the work and river habitats, and education work under the Blue Remembered Hills project has involved many schools as well as adults with learning difficulties.



Riverbank immediately after coppicing and fencing, showing poor bankside habitat from excess shading and uncontrolled stock access



The same location one year later showing vigorous coppice regrowth and healthy bankside vegetation

Environmental benefits

- Improved habitat by restoring semi-shade, improving bankside vegetation and reducing siltation
- Benefits to Biodiversity Action Plan species
- Improved water quality and contribution to EU Water Framework Directive requirements
- Control of alder *Phytophthora* disease

Economic benefits

- Meeting and developing local markets for firewood, charcoal or higher value uses
- Work for local contractors
- New business established using alder for joinery, and second business being started by a farmer using alder commercially for flooring
- Exploration by landowners of economic potential of small woodlands

Social benefits

- Greater understanding by landowners of importance of river habitats and how to manage them sensitively
- Improved skills and knowledge of local contractors
- Education with local schools and colleges, community events



Lessons

- Close co-operation between agencies including the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, Environment Agency and Defra RDS (now Natural England), ensured work was complementary with other schemes including Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Catchment Sensitive Farming.
- Funding for skilled support and facilitation is vital. Without this, many farmers and landowners do not have the confidence to know what work to carry out and how to get necessary permissions, felling licences, etc.

“The project has shown that neglect of alder sites is not an option”
Landowner

Further information

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