

Traditional orchards: a separate HAP to lowland wood-pasture and parkland?

The proposal to include traditional orchards as a priority habitat raises the question of whether the habitat should be made part of the existing HAP for lowland wood-pasture and parkland. The issue is primarily about what is the most effective way to secure the conservation of orchard habitats, ie, the main purpose of including them in an Action Plan. Discussions between Dr Keith Kirby, Chair of the lowland wood-pasture and parkland Steering Group and Dr Heather Robertson, proposer of the traditional orchards habitat, on 2/11/05, are summarised below:

1. Ecological similarities and differences

a) Similarities

Traditional orchards are a habitat complex like wood-pasture and parkland that is defined by habitat structure rather than vegetation type, topography or soils. The structure of open grown trees set in herbaceous vegetation is similar to wood pasture and parkland.

The species found in orchards overlap with those found in wood pastures and parkland. A particular set of species which have been intensively studied, the saproxylic invertebrates, illustrate this similarity well.

It should be noted that wood-pastures and parklands themselves overlap with other habitats such as heathland and acid grassland, orchards are similar in this regard.

b) Differences

The species composition of the trees is different, these being primarily in the family Rosaceae in orchards. Also there is usually a denser arrangement of the trees in orchards compared to wood-pasture and parkland, and the trees are generally of smaller stature. The implications of these differences are only beginning to be understood but are illustrated by the priority species noble chafer beetle (*Gnorimus nobilis*), which is almost confined to traditional orchards and is not found in wood-pasture and parkland. Lesser spotted woodpecker (Red List) may be another species with a particular association with traditional orchard habitats.

The landscape level character of orchards is also different to wood pasture and parkland and may have, as yet unknown, ecological effects. Orchards are generally distributed in small scale individual habitat patches, with a wider dispersion and frequency of occurrence of habitat patches in the countryside, compared to wood-pasture and parkland.

2. Threats and means of conservation delivery

The economic derivation of orchards has stemmed from fruit production, allied to livestock production, in contrast to the timber production of various kinds from wood pastures and parkland. Orchard origins are agricultural rather than forestry or amenity, which played a greater role in wood-pastures and parkland. This is reflected in current policy mechanisms, traditional orchards are within agri-environment

options and the CAP Single Payment system, but outside forestry grants and regulations. Orchard management is more often still within the agricultural mainstream, rather than having fallen outside the farming system. Of course there are overlaps, some wood-pastures and parklands are within agricultural enterprises and some orchards are abandoned as farmed land. Significant orchard conservation efforts have come from a distinctive set of enthusiasts, many of whom are members of a network of Orchard Groups across the country. Sustainable economic management of traditional orchards, based on quality fruit products, is a feature of such efforts.

Comparisons of loss rates are not possible between orchards and wood-pastures and parkland but the exercise of forestry regulations in wood-pastures and parklands are likely to have been a stronger brake on loss, compared to the very high loss rates suffered by traditional orchards.

3. Habitat management

Practical management of the trees in orchards has differed from wood-pasture and parkland due to the difference in economic purpose, with fruit tree management being distinctively based around regular pruning, rather than pollarding or felling. Grazing and / or mowing can feature in either habitat type.

4. Recognition of the habitat

To achieve effective conservation, a habitat has to be readily recognisable, not just to ecologists but to people involved in other disciplines such as planning. Orchards are readily recognisable across society, and indeed have a particular set of cultural associations not shared with wood-pastures and parkland. The consciousness of the conservation value of orchards needs to be strong among those involved in developments and countryside management, and is best aided by recognition of traditional orchards as a discrete habitat.

5. Conclusion

The conservation purpose of identifying traditional orchards as a priority habitat would best be served by clear recognition of traditional orchards as a discrete habitat, separate from lowland wood-pasture and parkland.

6. Habitat Plan operation in practice

The distinctive character, management and policy context of traditional orchards means that a separate Action Plan should be drawn up. However, the Plan could be grouped with others for practical operation of Steering Groups. The Plan could be within an umbrella group, like that for lowland grasslands, which covers 5 separate Action Plans. An agricultural grouping may be most appropriate, eg traditional orchards with hedgerows, or alternatively, grouping with lowland wood-pasture and parkland.