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A veteran tree site assessment-protocol

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Introduction

The importance of veteran trees has been increasingly recognised over the last ten years. However there has not been an agreed protocol for assessing the value of sites on the basis of their veteran tree populations.

What was done?

An initial set of attributes that might be used to assess the likely value of veteran tree sites was drawn up. This was then trialled on a series of sites in Dorset, Berkshire and Oxfordshire, and North Yorkshire. The thirty sites were deliberately chosen to include sites thought to be outstanding for their veteran trees, but also some that were not considered as important. The results were used to refine the survey and assessment process in consultation with other groups interested in veteran trees.

Results and conclusions

The field trial results separated out the sites roughly along the lines expected by those who separately had good knowledge of them. Where there were discrepancies the reasons for these were generally clear - for example there might be historical data available that would not be known to a field surveyor.

The original attributes were divided up into primary criteria to do with the number of veteran trees, their size and age, and secondary criteria such as extent of the site, presence of successor trees or dead wood, etc which were used to distinguish between sites that ranked similarly on the primary criteria.

A number of further field measures which are relatively easy to record and that provide valuable information are recommended to assist with guiding future management and setting management priorities but are not considered appropriate to assess or compare sites.

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Field Measure	Possible thresholds		
	High value	**Medium value**	**Low value**
Primary assessment criteria			
Number of veteran trees	>100	10-100	<10 (note sites with fewer than 10 trees normally require no further survey)
Number of ancient trees	>15	<15	0
Number of trees >1.5m dbh	>15	5-15	<5
Secondary assessment criteria			
Extent of site	>50ha	11-50ha	10ha or less
Tree cohort continuity (assessed by tree size)	At least 1 cohort per 100 yrs similar spp and distribution to veterans	Future generations present but gaps in cohorts/new generations do not reflect spp/ distribution of veterans	Large gaps in cohorts/veteran trees only
Visible deadwood (standing and fallen & incl. rot holes, hollow trunks etc.)	Abundant	Present but evidence of removal	Little present
Ground vegetation	Unimproved grassland/semi-natural woodland	Semi-improved or significantly disturbed	Arable, improved or suppressed (bare)
Veteran trees near-by (sites and trees in the landscape)	Adjacent	Within 1km	>1km away
Diversity within veteran tree population (species, form, age, situation)	Diversity in at least 3 characteristics (species, age, form and situation)	Diversity in 2 characteristics or significant diversity in 1 characteristic	Little diversity
Associated species interest (eg: lichens, saproxylic invertebrates)	Known to be high	Some interest known	
Documented habitat continuity - historical continuity	Documentary evidence of habitat continuity (several centuries)		
Potential	Interest likely to increase in short- to medium-term	Interest likely to increase moderately in short- to medium-term	Interest likely to decline in short- to medium-term

English Nature's viewpoint

The protocol seems to have worked well on the site's tested, but further trials would be desirable. Nevertheless, even in its current form, it should prove a useful tool in local and national comparisons of the likely value of different veteran tree sites. Wherever possible the basic field assessments described here should be supplemented by records for saproxylic invertebrates, epiphytic lichens and other groups for which veteran tree sites tend to be important. Historical records, where available, can help to further refine the assessments.

Selected references

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