

Conclusions

- Substantial potential exists to improve the natural environment of the West Weald Landscape through environmental enhancement and more co-ordinated management, contributing also to socio-economic values including the quality of life and local prosperity.
- The goal of balancing higher environmental quality with the viability of productive land uses is challenging, especially against the backdrop of increasing impacts of climate change on both natural and agricultural ecosystems as well as on water resources.
- The West Weald Landscape Project aims to foster such landscape-scale enhancement for nature and people through a robust integrated partnership approach.

The State of the West Weald's Natural Environment 2006

Summary

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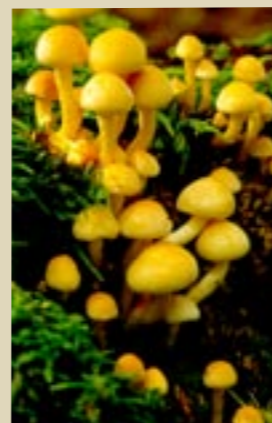
www.westweald.org.uk

The West Weald Landscape Project promotes the integrated management of a viable and enhanced landscape in the West Weald for people and nature.

This project is based at the Sussex Wildlife Trust, with funding also from Natural England, the Heritage Lottery Fund and Chichester District Council. The wider partnership includes Forestry Commission, Environment Agency, Butterfly Conservation, Surrey Wildlife Trust, South Downs Joint Committee, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Woodland Trust, National Trust, West Sussex and Surrey County Councils and Waverley Borough Council.

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West Weald Landscape Project

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Our extensive research in the West Weald Landscape has identified the assets and issues of the area, and set out a baseline to assess future changes in the nature and condition of the natural environment.



Introduction

- The West Weald is a valuable landscape, comprising a unique lowland environment with significant natural habitats and species that have been shaped and conserved by people over many centuries.
- The western end of the Low Weald is a low-lying undulating landscape based on heavy clay soils, framed by sandstone ridges of Lower Greensand and the river valleys of the Rother and upper Arun.
- Much of this attractive landscape remains fundamentally unchanged since the early-medieval period.
- The West Weald Landscape is an intricate mosaic of wooded farmland, ancient semi-natural woodland, commons and wood pasture, with many 'assart' fields and a dense network of hedgerows.
- The West Weald today is a rare example of a part-functioning forest ecosystem within our densely populated and developed country, worthy of dedicated conservation and enhancement efforts.



Assets

Environmental Resources

These include fundamental physical elements such as soils, air, water and climate, as well as the less tangible aspect of 'peace and quiet'. The West Weald Landscape (WWL) has:

- A benign climate and soils of low-moderate natural fertility, hence is reasonably suitable for agriculture.
- Relatively high air quality, pollution levels being half that of the surrounding area; the highest emissions of carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide are from towns and main roads.
- Three main river systems, the River Lod, River Kird and Loxwood Stream, with variable flows and generally good water quality; all form part of the River Arun catchment, important for water supply.
- High tranquillity levels for the built-up south east, with less human disturbance and light pollution; these are still higher than the English average, however, with just 5% of the area truly dark at night.



Biodiversity

This is the 'variety of life', comprised of habitats and species, as well as the important sites and areas in which they occur and the spatial relationships between them. The WWL is:

- An internationally important area for nature conservation, including two Special Areas of Conservation Ebernoe Common and The Mens, of exceptional landscape interest with two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the South Downs and Surrey Hills.
- One of the most wooded areas of the UK, woodland covering about a third of the landscape of which two-thirds is 'ancient' in nature.
- Home to 4,400 recorded species, including many priority species for conservation (95 listed under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan). Important wildlife includes woodland bats (Bechstein's bat) and butterflies (Pearl-bordered Fritillary), woodland and farmland birds as well as dormice, water vole, adders and rare wetland plants, fungi and lichens.



People & Nature

People have had a significant influence on both the past and present character of the landscape, through factors including settlement patterns, land management, and recreational activities. The WWL has:

- A fairly sparse population of c. 20,000 residents, which is slightly older and more dependent on car ownership than other rural areas of the south-east.
- Relatively low rates of built development, declining in recent times.
- Farming as the dominant land use of the countryside, through a mixture of arable crop production (mostly wheat) in larger-sized holdings and grazing livestock; most farmers are part-time, owner-occupiers of small-sized farm holdings (< 20 ha area).
- Less than a quarter of the landscape currently covered by agri-environment schemes, although many woodlands are covered by the Woodland Grant Scheme in Sussex; little land is registered as organic.
- Reasonable countryside access through an extensive network of public rights of way, and a greater proportion of 'accessible natural greenspace' here than the average for the south-east.
- Limited countryside recreation, accommodation facilities and tourism visits, most visitors tending to be older, professional people coming mainly by car on day trips.



Issues

Despite the substantial assets that the WWL holds, it is subject to various threats and competing demands on its natural environment which need to be addressed and balanced.

Environmental Resources

- Evidence of a changing climate through the 1990s exists, in common with other areas, with increases in both winter and summer temperatures and winter rainfall apparent; additionally subsequent summer drought conditions are challenging water resources across the region.
- The area's rivers are sensitive to surrounding land use and management practices, with links evident between agricultural intensification and more 'flashy' flow regimes and nitrate pollution.
- General declines in recent years of chemical water quality, and variable patterns of biological water quality, give grounds for concern over the health of rivers here and more widely.
- More light-polluted areas developed during the 1990s (despite no overall net increase in light levels); light pollution grew both regionally and nationally by 12% and 24% during this decade.

Biodiversity

- Only two of the six biological Sites of Special Scientific Interest present are currently in "favourable condition", leaving much scope to improve their conservation status.
- Woodland patches are relatively fragmented and isolated within a surrounding matrix of intensive agriculture, requiring expansion and better connections to link up habitats and enable wide-ranging vulnerable species such as the Barbastelle bat to move freely across the landscape.
- Other semi-natural habitats are very limited in extent, in need of substantial re-creation efforts, appropriate management and interconnections, in line with Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) targets.
- Most of the BAP-listed priority species present are threatened by inappropriate types and amounts of management, or the lack of it.
- Adequate survey and monitoring of species is lacking at the landscape scale, demanding more focused and systematic studies to properly assess trends in wildlife occurrence and populations.

People & Nature

- Much land use and management, especially arable agriculture, could greatly reduce its direct and indirect environmental impacts by adopting less intensive practices through agri-environment schemes, take-up of which has been lower than the regional and national average.
- Ongoing changes in agricultural economics are pressuring farmers to further intensify or give up farming altogether however, with an increase in 'lifestyle' countryside landowners evident.
- Improved public access to the countryside has to be integrated with the needs of landowners, wildlife and rural tranquillity.
- The West Weald is a little-known and visited landscape in its own right, with both residents and visitors alike heavily dependent on private transport for access to the countryside.