



The Forests and Woodlands of the South of Scotland

A Vision for Enhanced
Environmental and Community
Benefits from the Environmental
Alliance of the South of Scotland

We celebrate the contribution of forests and woodlands to our local economy, biodiversity and landscapes. We also believe the South of Scotland can and must make better use of the considerable natural capital found in our forests and woodlands, to address a wider range of social, economic and environmental issues, and deliver greater public value.

We envision a future landscape with a well-distributed mix of trees, forests and woodland across the South of Scotland, with a diversity of integrated land uses, a range of economic activity, a variety of high-quality, biodiverse landscapes, and a full spectrum of natural habitats benefitting people and nature.

About us

The Environmental Alliance of the South of Scotland (EASoS) is a network of more than 70 organisations and individuals, with a shared interest in addressing the climate and biodiversity crises in the South of Scotland.

Our work is co-directed by nine locally-led/based NGOs: the Southern Uplands Partnership; Tweed Forum, Borders Forest Trust, Galloway & Southern Ayrshire Biosphere, Galloway Fisheries Trust, Crichton Carbon Centre, Solway Firth Partnership, D&G Woodlands and RSPB Scotland. This vision has been co-produced by us, in conversation with the wider membership.

We share here our vision for Forests and Woodlands in the South of Scotland, which we define as Dumfries & Galloway and the Scottish Borders, although much here is also of relevance for neighbouring local authority areas.

The South of Scotland is the most heavily afforested part of the UK. The landscape of the South of Scotland was transformed in the early 20th Century from a region with a few native woods, managed mainly by coppicing, and scattered policy woodlands on private estates, to one dominated by commercial plantation of conifers, principally in the uplands and mostly managed by clear-felling.

The change brought many benefits, such as the creation of an important timber processing industry, but also contributed to environmental and social changes, including the loss of hill-farming and the social structures it supported; loss of open habitats such as heathlands; destruction of peatlands, releasing incalculable volumes of stored carbon; and deterioration of water quality, affecting fish populations.

The Dumfries and Galloway Council Woodland Strategy (2014)* states a tree cover of 27.86% across the region with some local catchments as high as 53% (Eskdale) and 55% (Upper Ken, Dee and Fleet). Overall tree cover in the Scottish Borders has been estimated to be 21.45%. These figures compare to the average of around 19% across Scotland as a whole.

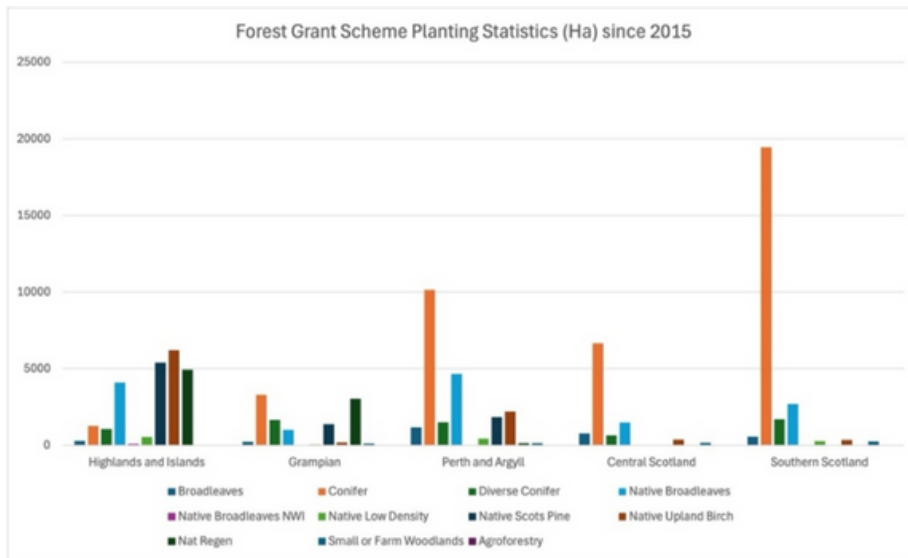
*https://www.dumgal.gov.uk/media/17433/Dumfries-and-Galloway-Forestry-and-Woodland-Strategy/pdf/Forestry_and_Woodland_Strategy_April_FINAL1.pdf

Conversely, ancient woodland cover is one of the lowest in the UK, consisting of less than 0.1% of the land. Even the broader category of broad-leaved woodland is very small in extent. The National Inventory of Woodland and Trees (1999) estimated that it constituted only around 7% of all woodland types in the Scottish Borders and Dumfries & Galloway regions, with Sitka Spruce- dominated conifer forests making up more than 78%.

More up to date statistics from the National Forest Inventory are not published for local authority regions, but twenty-first century forestry policies have visibly exacerbated this imbalance in the South of Scotland. A major and rapid shift in land use is again taking place across the South of Scotland, driven by a combination of public grant, economics and assumed environmental benefits, in particular around carbon.

Woodland Creation options for the Forest Grant Scheme, shown in the charts below relate to the wider South Scotland Conservancy Area but demonstrate the continued dominance of commercial conifer forestry compared to other types of Forest and Woodland, and compared to other parts of Scotland. The statistics for 2015-25* show 86% of grants were allocated to conifer options, continuing the long-term trend in South Scotland.

*https://www.forestry.gov.scot/sites/default/files/publications/PDF_Grants_Forestry_Grant_Scheme_Statistics_260925_V1.0.jpg_.pdf

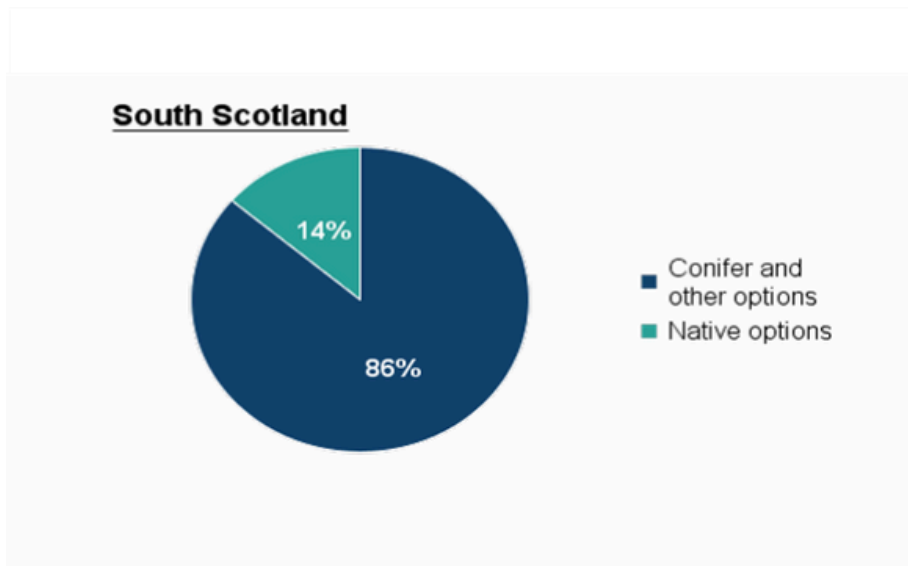


We believe the scale, pace and impact of change, which is unique to our region compared to other parts of rural Scotland, is not adequately understood or engaged with by policymakers. Many lessons from the past have been learned, but there is the very real prospect that opportunities for the future are being missed.

An alternative approach is needed, one that moves away from simply producing timber biomass or maximising carbon credits, to one that utilises a diversity of tree species, produces quality timber, locks up carbon for longer, restores ecosystems, increases biodiversity, and creates a greater number of meaningful jobs and benefits for local communities.

Whilst other parts of Scotland have already begun a move towards multi-purpose forestry, using a wider range of tree species and alternative management techniques, the South of Scotland remains heavily dependent on commercial forestry, reliant on a few non-native coniferous trees and managed in such a way that limits potential benefits for communities and the environment, sometimes even having a negative impact on them.

A reliance on single-species monocultures with limited age-structures is also unlikely to be resilient in the face of future climate change, with more frequent extreme weather events and new pests and diseases. More recent publicly funded forestry schemes aimed at carbon capture have been investment-focused, similarly providing limited environmental and community benefits.



The Environmental Alliance of the South of Scotland (EASoS) recommends that the following actions be incorporated into future forestry and planning policy, as a way of delivering our vision for a wider range of public goods, including increased environmental and community benefits, in the South of Scotland. These interlinked actions would make the best use of limited public resources to fulfil critical policy objectives.

Place resilience at the heart of forest and woodland planning, funding, establishment, and management to address climate change impacts such as drought, storms, pests, and diseases.

Proactively engage communities in decision-making and governance processes around future woodlands and forests, ensuring meaningful participation and local benefits.

Incentivise diversification of the types of woodlands and forestry in our region, giving greater priority and resource to planting of native broadleaf species; natural regeneration and colonisation; agroforestry and regenerative forestry practices. We would also like to see incentivised diversification of land access, with greater support for locally-led forest and woodland-based micro-enterprises, including by communities.

Better protect sites with soil, species and habitat constraints, as well as areas of historic interest or landscape value, within the decision-making process for forestry and woodland expansion.

Embed community wealth-building approaches across all aspects of woodland and forestry creation and management, ensuring a Just Transition. Increase resources for community capacity building and make financial support dependent on community engagement impact and benefit assessments.

Establish a publicly accessible system for monitoring and influencing optimum management practices within forests and woodlands, ensuring transparency and accountability.

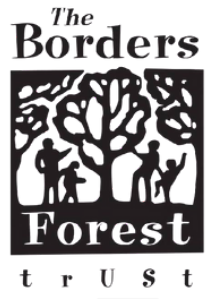
Support the commercial forestry sector to improve biodiversity within forests, through funded opportunities for shared learning, cross-sector partnerships, and active management, with mechanisms to measure results.

Review Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) screening practices and introduce cumulative impact assessments to better protect important landscapes, species and habitats and ensure balanced, diverse land-use.

Address the self-seeding of non-native trees, particularly conifers, in open habitats and riparian areas.

Better protect and actively restore soils, waterways, and peatlands within forests and woodlands. Strengthen the “Deciding future management options for afforested deep peatland” guidance*, to rank carbon, soils and hydrology ahead of timber, so that forests harvested from deep peat are restored as peatland or low impact silvicultural systems, with minimum disruption to hydrology and soil.

*Scottish Forestry, August 2025 <https://www.forestry.gov.scot/publications/managing-forests-on-deep-peatland>



living land, living community



Next Steps

We welcome the opportunity to collaborate with policymakers, industry and communities, to explore how these recommendations can be implemented.

Please contact us to discuss how we can help: EASoS@sup.org.uk