



2019 FORWARD PLAN

INTRODUCTION

The Montane Scrub Action Group was established in 1996 in response to the “Cinderella” nature of any treeline or montane scrub habitat at the time. They did not feature in any policy documents and, with only few exceptions, the rare sub-arctic willow scrub was afforded only cursory attention in conservation strategies.

Over the past 22 years this has changed. “Montane Scrub” now features in Scottish forestry policy and strategic documents and is recognised as a, generally, missing vegetation component from the altitudinal range of habitats. Over this time the MSAG, through the auspices of its supporting organisations, has steered 3 HLF projects aiming to promote understanding and increase the area of woodland/scrub above the current timberline.

Members of the MSAG have been individuals with interest, knowledge and experience of treeline or montane scrub, usually supported by their employing organisations. The work of the group has focused on promoting understanding and collating existing experience of treeline/montane scrub for wider dissemination. To this end the Scrubber’s Bulletin has had 13 issues, and there is now a website with free access to key documents, including a suite of Best Practice Guides.

Given the increased recognition for the upper forest habitats and montane scrub, and the existence now of both forestry and conservation grants schemes, the MSAG have re-focused their purpose and aims for the future. This paper presents the outcome of discussions regarding these two factors and sets out the ongoing role for the group and the key areas of focus for activity.

VISION & MSAG ROLE

Landscape Vision

A diverse mountain woodland habitat is a persistent feature of the upland landscape, bridging forest and higher, open heaths, which is valued by land owners, managers and the wider public.

Mission statement

The MSAG plays a central role in promoting the delivery of abundant and self-perpetuating mountain woodland, creating an attractive and biodiverse link between forests and open mountain vegetation. Our advocacy inspires communities and the wider public to value and utilise this resource, whether directly or through the wider landscape benefits that it provides.

RATIONALE

Although much has been achieved over the last 22 years and treelines and montane scrub are now widely understood terms there is still much to do to achieve action on the ground and physical recovery of the ecotone. In the absence of another body focussing on advocacy for this role the MSAG believes this need justifies its continued existence.

As such the following are the key reasons such a group is required:

- Ongoing promotion, still very few examples of action on the ground and widespread understanding of issues and good practice is low
- No other body is articulating a vision for the treeline ecotone
- No other body is collating and articulating the evidence of wider benefits of a restored ecotone
- No other body promotes the treeline ecotone within the wider forestry and upland land management discussions
- No other body collates or provides support and advice to individuals or bodies wishing to undertake practical action
- MSAG is an effective group that combines research interests & experience with that of on-the-ground action leading to the development and evolution of best practice

ACTION PLAN 2019 - 2024

This plan outlines the priorities for action by the MSAG over the next five years. The actions are separated into areas. At the time of writing there are no delivery mechanisms identified, defining these form an early focus for action.

Promotion

- Change MSAG terminology to “Mountain Woodland” rather than montane scrub and treeline woodland
- Promote the whole treeline ecotone habitat (rather than focussing solely on rare shrub species), and the role of mountain woodland as an environmental health indicator
- Emphasise the absence of mountain woodland in the public arena
- Emphasise the potential diversity of the whole habitat and the benefits its restoration would bring
- Promote the gains of landscape-scale projects rather than the small-scale allowable by current woodland creation grants
- Promote uptake of low density treeline option in the woodland creation grant, and through the Tall herb & scrub Agri-Environment & Climate Change option.
- Lobby for cross-compliance between larger, higher upland forestry schemes and inclusion of treeline low density planting
- Challenge the growing focus on ‘natural capital’, particularly where it is based on incomplete information about the relative importance of different habitats, and/or where the habitats are too impoverished to contribute to their potential.
- Engage with land owning environmental NGO’s to encourage their constructive management of any treeline ecotone land within their holdings.

- Use the current opportunity of BREXIT to push for greater mountain woodland consideration in trials or proposals for post-BREXIT incentive schemes.
- Continue to produce issues of Scrubber's Bulletin when sufficient material is available
- Investigate the potential to develop a promotional product similar to the "Grazing Toolbox"

(soft) Research

- Collate evidence articulating the benefits, and "natural capital indicators" of the whole mountain woodland ecotone.
- Identify data gaps, and ways to fill them, in evidence for the benefits, and "natural capital indicators" of the whole mountain woodland ecotone
- Encourage investigation into barriers to uptake of current low density planting grant option
- Investigate minimum specifications for a cross-compliance grant condition requiring treeline planting
- Collate evidence of on-going losses, and/or living fossil syndrome, of mountain woodland
- Collate data on all existing schemes, including those not using grants for potential use as case studies and improving best practice
- Identify new funding sources both for potential MSAG work and practical on-the-ground action delivered by other bodies

Advisory

- Continue to offer an advisory service to those developing or proposing to develop practical projects
- Keep up-to-date with legislation, policy and developments in management and establishment techniques, particularly related to herbivore management in the uplands
- Review BPGs at an appropriate interval, or following substantial changes in incentive schemes

Plan Development & Review

This plan sets out a list of activity that MSAG intend to pursue over the next five years.

Achievement of many of the actions will be dependent on identifying suitable funds or man power from within the supporting organisations. For this reason the actions will be regularly reviewed (every six months) and where possible converted into deliverables including SMART objectives.

Finalised by D Gilbert, Chair MSAG, Feb 2019