

Restore UK woodland by letting trees plant themselves, says report

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Allowing trees and woodland to regenerate through the natural dispersal of seeds should become the default way to restore Britain's forest cover, according to a new report.

Natural regeneration brings the most benefits for biodiversity, is cost-effective and may sequester more carbon than previously thought, argues Rewilding Britain.

"Given sufficient seed sources and suitable site conditions, trees will plant themselves in their millions for free over as large an area of land as we are willing to spare," said the charity in a new report seeking to galvanise support for natural solutions to help meet the government's ambitious target to increase Britain's forest cover by 30,000 hectares annually by 2025.

Only 13,460 hectares of woodland were planted in Britain in the year to March 2020, mostly in Scotland, but the government's targets should see forest cover rise by at least 2% from its current 13%. The European Union average is 40%.

Rewilding Britain, alongside other charities including Friends of the Earth, are campaigning to double Britain's forest cover to 26%.

The government this month announced a plethora of tree-planting schemes in England to help meet its 30,000-hectare target – an area the size of Milton Keynes every year – which was last achieved in 1989.

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund last week allocated almost £40m to 68 projects to plant more than 800,000 trees, including 10,000 trees at 50 NHS sites and 12 "tiny forests" the size of a tennis court in urban areas – the brainchild of the Conservation Education & Research Trust.

Separately, the government announced £12.1m government investment in plans for 500 hectares of trees to be planted in 10 community forests including the Mersey Forest and White Rose Forest in Leeds.

The government also pledged £4m to fund innovative tree-planting in towns and cities and near rivers to reduce flood risk. The fund includes plans for 30,168 new trees in the Upper Thames and Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and 10,257 trees to be planted in the Ure and Wharfe catchments in Yorkshire to improve wildlife habitat and connectivity.

While there are also generous woodland creation grants available to private landowners to plant trees including commercial timber crops, natural regeneration is not supported by any targeted funds.

In its report, Rewilding Britain calls for natural regeneration to be explicitly incentivised by the future Environmental Land Management Scheme as part of a more coordinated approach to forestry, farming and rewilding.

It says that natural regeneration should be made the default approach to woodland creation unless trees are unable to establish or would take too long to arrive because seed sources are too distant or areas are too overgrazed. If this is the case, forest creators could kickstart natural processes by scarifying the ground, scattering seed or controlling grazing. Only after this should planting locally-sourced saplings be considered, particularly if it positively engages local communities.

Rebecca Wrigley, chief executive of Rewilding Britain, said: "People have this mindset that woodland expansion means planting trees and that's across the conservation sector as well.

"Nature is pretty good at doing this itself. Natural regeneration brings multiple potential benefits – you get the right tree in the right place, you don't get the potential carbon emissions you get with planting on peaty soils and you boost the complexity of the ecosystem, which builds resilience. Natural regeneration also helps species to shift and adapt to climate change. There's growing evidence that it can sequester more carbon although there isn't a broad research base yet because natural regeneration is just not on people's radars."

Britain is the second largest net importer of forest products after China but the current tree-planting push is driven by the commitment to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. The Committee on Climate Change, the government's expert advisers on climate, has recommended that 1.5bn trees be planted by 2050 to sequester carbon.

One study of natural regeneration in Britain calculated that the carbon absorption of naturally regenerating forest began at 0.6 tonnes of carbon per hectare per year, rising to 4.1 tonnes per hectare per year in maturity.

Speaking to a tree summit organised by Friends of the Earth, Lord Goldsmith, the forestry minister, quoted research suggesting that nature-based solutions such as trees and soils could provide a third of the emissions reductions required under the Paris agreement to limit global heating to 2C but currently only received 3% of global climate finance.

Wrigley welcomed Goldsmith's support for natural climate solutions including regeneration "but it's just translating that into an integrated approach to land use where we look at this as a whole and consider farming, forestry and rewilding".

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/dec/15/restore-uk-woodland-trees-report-rewilding-britain>