

NCA 2 Northumberland Sandstone Hills

Overview

The area extends in a curving north-south arc across Northumberland, separating the vales of the Cheviot fringe from the Northumberland coastal plain. A total of 15% of the NCA lies within the Northumberland National Park. It is a plateau landscape, the ridgetops and upper slopes covered with heather and grass moorland broken by large geometric blocks of conifer, and is included under the Upland and Upland Fringe Agricultural Landscape Type. Farming is mainly livestock, but with around a third mixed farms or arable. The field pattern is a mixture of older, irregular enclosure with larger, regular fields enclosed in the late 18th and 19th centuries. It is sparsely settled, with less than 1% comprising urban area. The area is perceived as very tranquil, valued for its open vistas and dark night skies. Woodland cover is significant, with a total area of 14,195 ha, or 19.5% of the NCA. A large proportion is coniferous plantations within the Forestry Commission estate, but 4% is ancient woodland, covering less than 2% of the NCA. Broadleaved woodland is mainly associated with rivers, scarp slopes and the parkland settings of the large country mansions on the lower fellsides slopes such as Chillingham, Craggside and Alnwick Castle. On the lower levels, the landscape is largely one of pasture with some arable, with woodland on scarp slopes and along water courses.

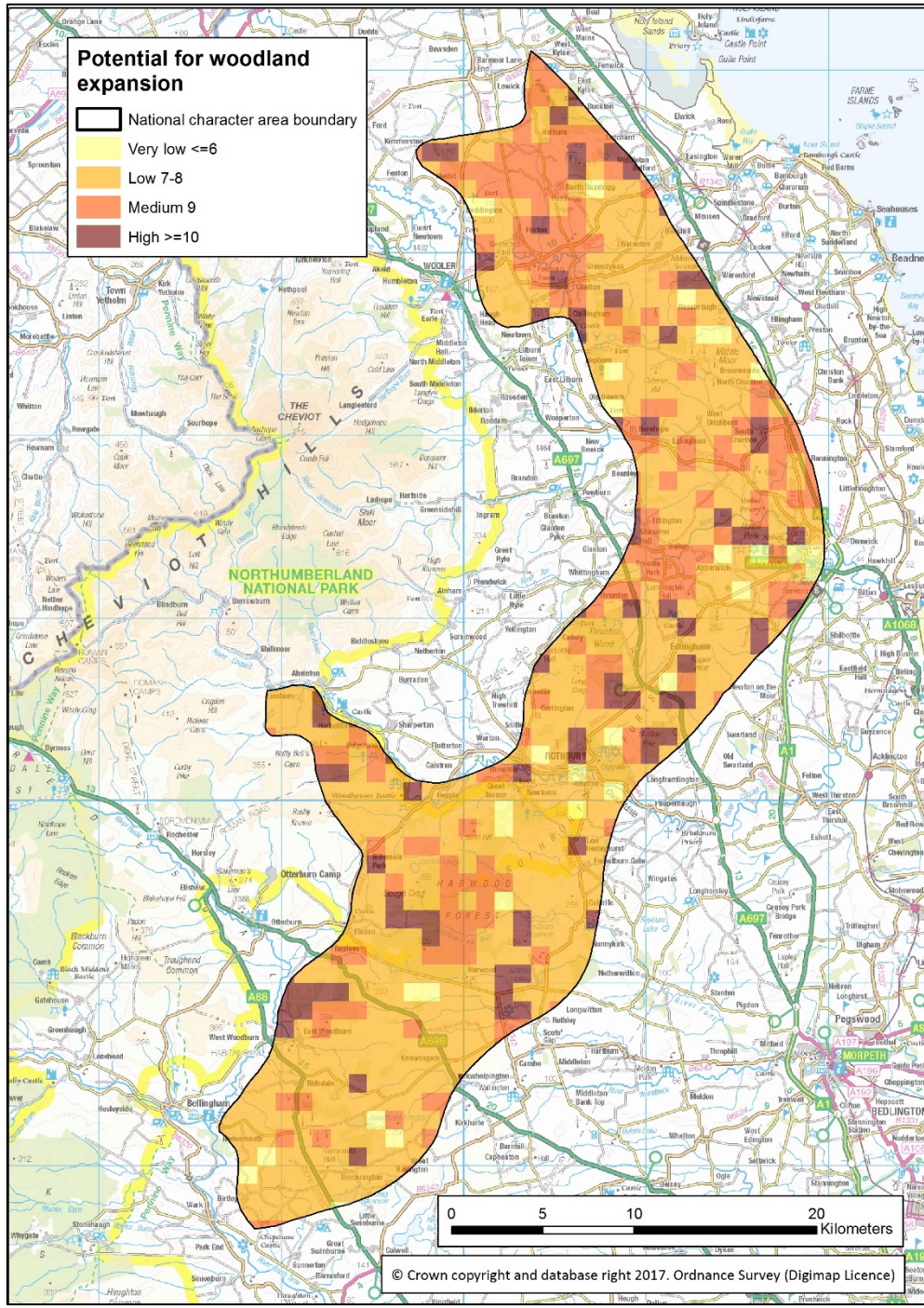
The Historic Environment Character

The NCA has some of the most nationally important archaeological landscapes in England, with significant prehistoric and medieval remains. Early settlement and activity is evident in the Neolithic and Bronze Age visible remains, including standing stones, cup-and-ring marked stones, burial mounds and cairns. Later Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement is represented by hillforts and other enclosures mainly along the transitional slopes. Earthwork remains of villages and hamlets suggest that medieval settlement was quite extensive. The character of the medieval and later settlement pattern is legible in the isolated farmsteads and small hamlets served by the market towns of Rothbury and Alnwick. Large estates have been a major influence on the landscape. Country houses and castles with extensive estates and parkland lie on the lower slopes. Extensive reorganisation of the medieval landscape driven by large estates in the 18th and 19th centuries resulted in intensive grain cultivation, cattle rearing and fattening, dairying for local and distant markets and much more wide-scale sheep farming.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates that there is a low potential for woodland expansion, in part reflecting the extensive areas of existing coniferous plantation. These areas do, however, have the potential for replanting with native species woodland. The areas with the highest potential for new woodland are scattered across the character area, but a focused mainly in the river valleys such as the Till, Aln, and Rede and around the smaller burns in Harwood Forest. This NCA is an area with high archaeological sensitivity, particularly prehistoric cup and ring marked stones, and proposals for new woodland should avoid impacting sites both directly and their setting. The statements of environmental opportunities with the NCA profiles highlight the large-scale restoration of heathland through removal of conifer blocks. Whilst this would reduce the overall woodland coverage, it does also highlight the possibility for compensatory

planting of well-designed and well-sited woodland. There is the potential to extend areas of existing woodland plantation, using broadleaved species suited to the acid ground conditions. The importance of buffering areas for red squirrel designated reserves is highlighted. Opportunities for managing, expanding and connecting fragmented woodland and scrub along river corridors is highlighted in the NCA profile, including areas of gorse and juniper scrub. Coppicing was historically significant in this area, and should be encouraged in existing woodland, especially in areas of alder woodland. Alleviation of flood risk is a priority, including through new woodland planting along riparian zones.



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