

NCA 15 Durham Magnesian Limestone Plateau

Overview

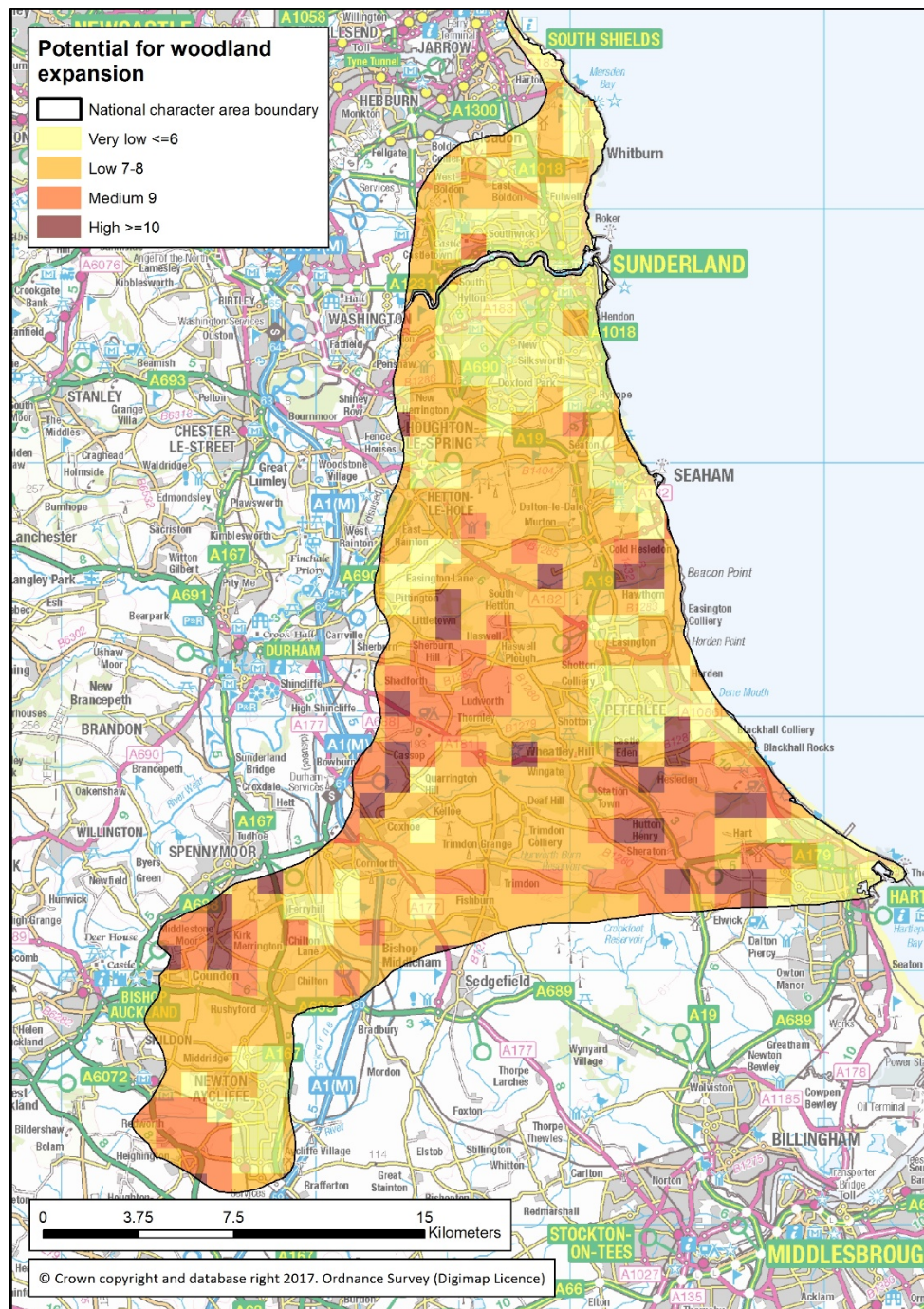
The NCA comprises an open landscape defined by a Limestone scarp to the west and Limestone coastal cliffs to the east. It extends along the coastline from the southern boundary of the Newcastle-Gateshead conurbation in the north, to Hartlepool and Newton Aycliffe in the south. The rural landscape is one dominated by arable agriculture, particularly in the central plateau where fields are large and regular in form. Towards the Limestone scarp and the coastal cliffs, fields are smaller and less regular and here there is more pastoral farming. The area has a high proportion of urban development, particularly Sunderland at the north end of the NCA, and the settlement pattern is dominated by former industrial villages and towns, as well as the planned modern towns of Newton Aycliffe and Peterlee. The presence of major urban areas, both within and adjacent to the NCA, has led to the development of a network of major routes crossing the area linking the region's towns and cities. Routes include the A1M and A19. Woodland cover is sparse, at around 7.5% of the NCA, and ancient woodland covers around 1%. Broadleaved woodland is restricted mainly to steep slopes in uncultivated land. There are also areas of woodland planted as part of the Community Forest scheme, although the Great North and Tees Forest schemes are closed.

The Historic Environment Character

There is evidence of human activity in the area from the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, particularly in the coastal area. On the plateau, there is a concentration of prehistoric barrows and cairns. The historic landscape character has been influenced mainly by medieval settlement and field patterns, overlain by post medieval and modern industrial development. The area lay within the lands of the Bishop of Durham and was part of the Palatinate of Durham. The medieval settlement pattern was nucleated in the form of planned villages, with mixed agriculture. Following post-medieval enclosure and re-organisation, some settlements were deserted, and model farms were established associated with large, regular fields, a pattern still observable in the rural landscape. Limestone and sand quarrying expanded rapidly in the late 18th century, used not only in agricultural improvement, but also for construction, steel making and pharmaceuticals. Raw materials of sand and clay led to the growth of important glass and brick manufacture. The River Wear became a centre for ship building, and Sunderland became the focus of much industrial development. Reputed to have been the biggest ship-building centre in the world, Sunderland was also a centre of limestone quarrying and burning, coal mining, and glass- and pottery making. Outside of the Sunderland conurbation, mining villages were established next to expanding collieries. In the 1940s the planned new towns of Peterlee and Newton Aycliffe were built. Following closure of the coal mines in the late 20th century, the landscape and structures of the industry were cleared away and land restored and redeveloped.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The map of historic and natural environment attributes indicates that there is only a low potential for woodland expansion; a result of the highly urbanised and developed character of the area. Even so, the NCA profile does identify some opportunities for new woodland planting, though it also emphasises that this should be appropriate to landscape character, species composition, and respect to existing priority habitats, archaeology, and access and recreation. The mapping of attributes supports this, and most areas of higher potential are in the more rural areas in the southern part of the NCA. In particular, woodland could be expanded along valley-sides and in the urban fringe.



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