

NCA 39 Humberhead Levels

Overview

The NCA comprises a very flat landscape characterised by alluvial deposits, creating one of the most productive arable areas in Britain. It is included within the Eastern Arable Agricultural Landscape Type. It is low-lying, with some areas below the mean high-water mark, and encompasses the broad floodplains of several major navigable rivers that drain in to the Humber Estuary. The farmland is intensively farmed in very large, open, geometric fields divided by ditches and dykes, with scattered and fragmented semi-natural habitats. The more recently reclaimed land is without trees or hedgerows. Rivers are contained by flood embankments and a network of ditches, dykes and canals. In the north deposits of sand and gravel support remnants of lowland heaths, and there has been some sand and gravel extraction, whilst elsewhere less fertile sandy soils have been planted up with conifers. Previously there was extensive commercial peat extraction, but this has now ceased and restoration is taking place. Settlement is generally on slightly higher, drier land, and is dominated by villages, small market towns and more industrial centres such as Doncaster, Goole and Selby. There are also large, relatively isolated farmsteads along with industrial-scale agriculture buildings. The NCA is a communications hub, with major motorway interchanges between the M62, M18 and M190, as well as with the A19 and other major roads and railways. Woodland accounts for only 5.4% of the NCA, only 1% of which is ancient woodland. Where woodland does occur, it tends to be on the sandier soils to the north and south, and dominated by coniferous plantation.

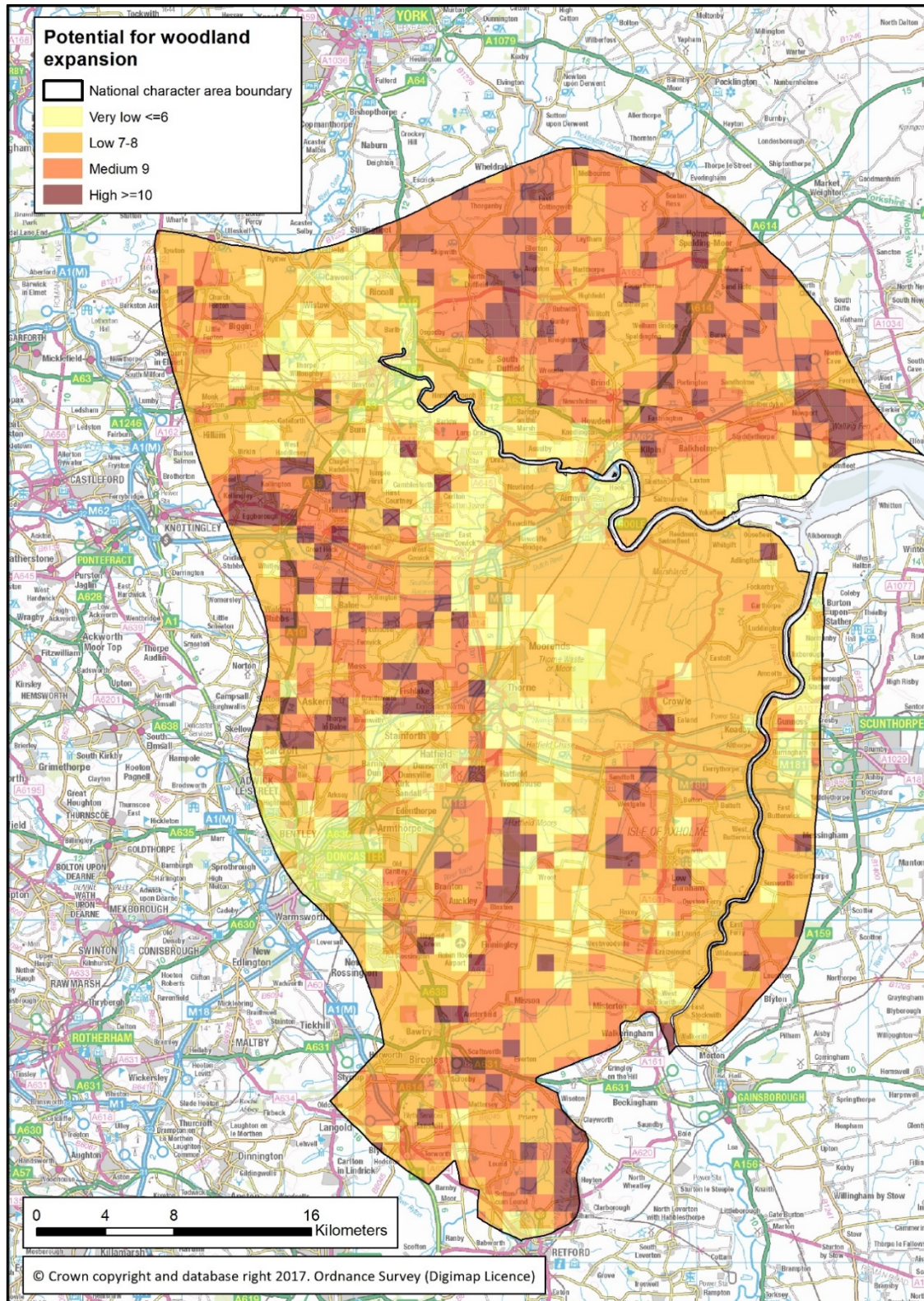
The Historic Environment Character

The slightly higher and drier areas of land within the NCA has attracted settlement from prehistory, allowing easy access to the rich food resources available in the wetlands. Finds of prehistoric boats suggests that it was used for hunting and fishing. Evidence for farming in the Iron Age has been found at Sutton Common, in form of large enclosures, where wet soil conditions have preserved organic remains. In the Roman period there were farmsteads, roads, salterns, and pottery kilns. From the later medieval period, there is evidence of turbaries (peat cutting), retting pits for flax, and former common fields surviving as ridge and furrow. The area also has one of the largest areas of surviving open strip field systems at the Isle of Axholme, which is of international significance. Land drainage began in the medieval period, with the development of monasteries, and towns along river trade routes. The wetland nature of the area favoured moated sites to the north of Doncaster and around the Isle of Axholme. Large-scale drainage activity began in the 1620s when Dutch drainage engineers began large-scale river diversions and land drainage, which has been a major factor in the creation of the modern characteristic flat treeless landscape drained by a network of drains and dykes. This process intensified in the 18th and 19th centuries, alongside large-scale enclosure. The flat landscape was exploited during the world wars of the 20th century, when it was used for military airfields, and also as the locations of bombing decoys for important ports such as Hull.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates only a low level of opportunities for new woodland, which is unsurprising given the importance of the agricultural landscape, and of the wetland habitats. Where it does show more potential, it is

in the sandier areas on the north side of the Humber and around settlements to the south, particularly around existing woodland. The expansion of existing woodland blocks, or new woodland planting, should take account of historic field patterns and of archaeological sites visible only as crop- or soil-marks.



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