

NCA 130 Hampshire Downs

Overview

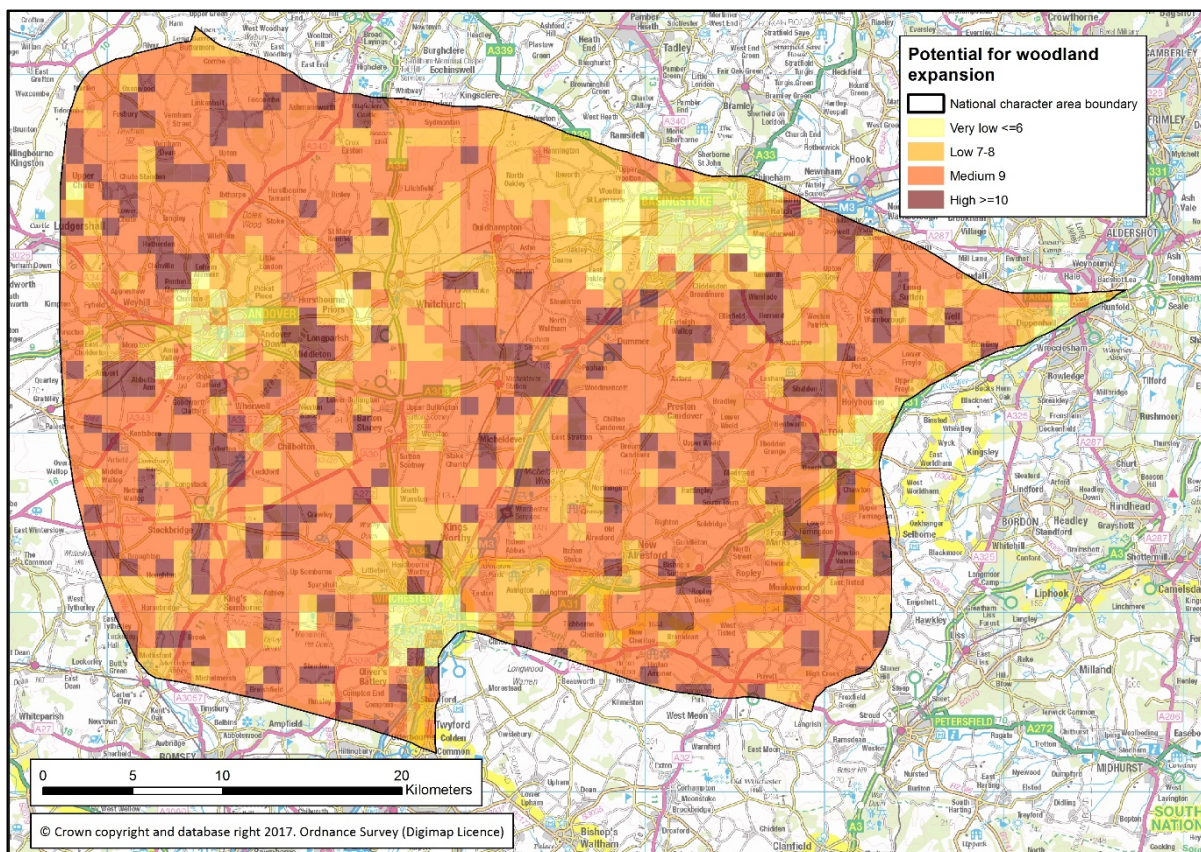
The Hampshire Downs NCA comprises a broad belt of chalk between the Dorset Downs and Salisbury Plain in the west, the South Downs in the east, and the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs in the north. It is included within the Chalk and Limestone Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type. The area rises to its highest point in the north west, where a scarp slope overlooks the Thames Basin. The southern edge lies within the South Downs National Park, and the north-western section is within the North Wessex Downs AONB, with 36% of the total area of the NCA covered by landscape designation. It is an open, rolling landscape dominated by large arable fields, with small surviving areas of calcareous grassland mainly on the northern scarp and on isolated areas of common. Fields around settlements tend to be smaller, suggestive of piecemeal enclosure, with larger fields on the valleys sides and downland. The NCA covers some major regional urban centres, such as Winchester, Andover and Basingstoke, as well as smaller, historic market towns such as Stockbridge, Whitchurch and Alton. Rural settlement tends to be nucleated, and dominated by villages and hamlets strung out along the river valleys, though in the east, there is a higher degree of dispersion with irregular small agglomerations and scattered farmsteads. The NCA includes major communications corridors, particularly focused on Winchester, including the M3, A33, A34 and A303, as well as the main rail link between Southampton and London. The area is reasonably well-wooded, with a total of 14% cover, of which just over 46% is ancient woodland. Woodland is particularly associated with the higher parts of the Downs, where ancient oak woodland predominates, especially around Andover, as well as ash-hazel woodland. Ancient woodland is also found on the steep chalk escarpments, particularly in the north of the NCA, and beech hangars are also a feature on open downland.

The Historic Environment Character

There are numerous significant archaeological remains recorded across the NCA, and it was intensively settled with remains of prehistoric and Roman date, including settlement in the form of hill forts, farmsteads, villas and enclosures. Winchester, on the southern edge of the NCA, was an important centre from the late Iron Age, being a regional capital in the Roman period and a royal centre of the West Saxons in the early medieval period. The area was important for both arable and wool production from the medieval period, with the development of large-scale commercial farming from the 15th century onwards. The importance of sheep farming for the production of wool had a significant impact on the historic landscape of the NCA. The extensive chalk downlands were utilised for grazing, and watermeadow systems were developed from the end of the medieval period, which produced an early flush of grass in the spring and hay for winter fodder. Woodland, too, was managed for the benefit of sheep farming, as coppice with standards produced materials for large quantities of hurdles. Many of the watermeadow systems survive as distinctive systems of herring-bone ridge and furrow on the flood plains of the river valleys, even though almost all are now defunct. The area of grassland on the chalk downs, however, has been much reduced as large areas were turned over to arable production in the second half of the 20th century.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

There are medium opportunities for new woodland, according to the mapping of historic and natural attributes, particularly in the form of expansion of areas of existing woodland. Existing woodland is well-distributed across large parts of the NCA, thus the opportunities for woodland expansion are also well-distributed, particularly in a wide band across the centre of the area and in the north-western section of the NCA. The NCA profile highlights the need to manage existing woodland, including through traditional methods such as coppicing, and this includes established new areas through linking existing woodland habitats. Any new woodland needs to be managed sensitively in relation to the historic environment, as many of the areas highlighted as suitable by the mapping are adjacent to, or include known archaeological monuments. These include extensive scheduled monuments such as the multi-period settlement site at Brockley Warren and Micheldever Wood. Consideration also needs to be taken of archaeological sites that are not protected through designation, including many that have been affected by recent ploughing.



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