

NCA 145 Exmoor

Overview

The NCA straddles the county boundary between Somerset and Devon, with the coastline of the Bristol Channel forming the northern boundary. Included within the Upland and Upland Fringe Agricultural Landscape Type, it is an extensive upland landscape encompassing the whole of Exmoor National Park. The western coastal strip falls within the North Devon AONB. It is an overwhelmingly rural area, most of which is agricultural land. The high moorland is dominated by unenclosed rough grazing, mainly by sheep, with large, rectilinear enclosures on the moorland edges and steep hillsides. On lower ground, the field pattern is one of small, irregular or semi-regular enclosed fields, some originating as enclosed strip fields. Field boundaries are characterised by drystone walls, stone-faced hedgebanks and hedgerows. The settlement pattern is largely dispersed, with many individual farmsteads and hamlets. Villages are found on the lower slopes and in valleys. Within the National Park, the main settlement is Dulverton, considered to be a main gateway to the park for visitors, and on the coast Porlock, and Lynton and Lynmouth are mainly tourist resorts. Other major settlements in the area are on the west coast, including Barnstaple, Braunton and Ilfracombe. Barnstaple is the main town for north Devon and is a former port on the River Taw, whilst Ilfracombe is one of the main resorts of the north Devon coast. As fits with Barnstaple's status of one of the county's main urban centres, it is a communications hub with several main roads converging on it, along with a rail link along the Taw valley to Exeter. Around 12% of the NCA is woodland, of which just over 18% is ancient woodland. Ancient woodland is mostly located in the steep coastal combes and inland valleys. There are some large blocks of broadleaved woodland below Dunkery Beacon, though the north-east fringes of the National Park also have extensive coniferous plantations.

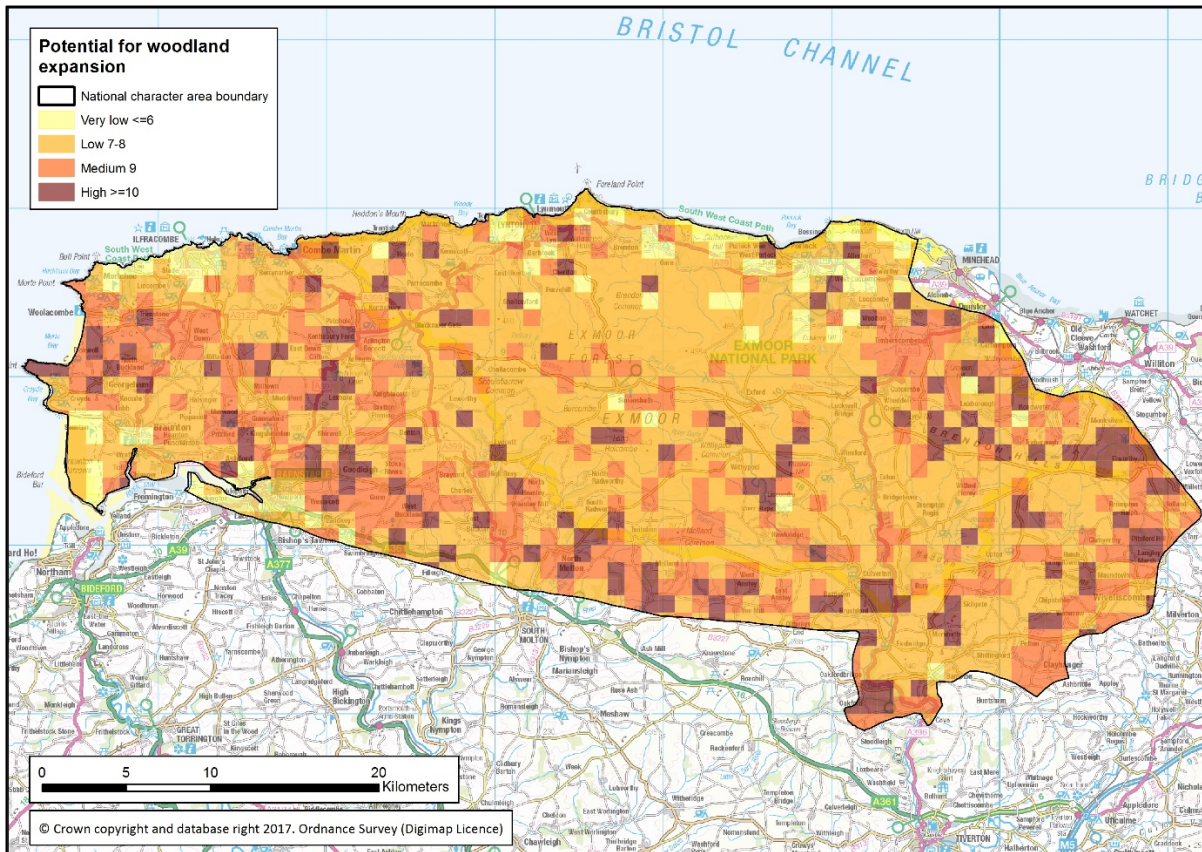
The Historic Environment Character

The NCA has a rich legacy of archaeological monuments from the prehistoric periods onwards, but particularly from the Bronze Age and Iron Age, in the form of stone circles and alignments, burial mounds, hillforts and defended enclosures, as well as the remains of settlements. On the high central moorland of Exmoor, there are some surviving prehistoric field systems. Iron working is known around the fringes of Exmoor from the Roman period. The moorland of Exmoor was royal hunting forest from the medieval period until the 19th century, when there were attempts at agricultural improvement. Away from the high moorland, medieval farming was a mixture of open fields farmed in strips and enclosures, though the process of enclosing the open fields was a piecemeal process beginning in the medieval period. The NCA includes a rare example of a surviving open field, at Braunton, to the north west of Barnstaple, known as Braunton Great Field. As enclosures progressed, some fields were consolidated into large blocks of more regular enclosures, known as barton fields. Barton fields formed part of ring-fenced farms and were particularly associated with the development of stock rearing.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a low level of potential for woodland expansion within the NCA, though there are clusters of higher potential on the eastern side of Exmoor where new planting would extend the large areas of existing woodland. The mapping also indicates areas of potential on the southern fringes of the NCA

and around Barnstaple, where new woodland would expand the wooded coombes. The NCA profile also highlights the opportunity to plant new woodland around developments, to filter views and aid the sense of tranquillity.



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