

NCA 149 The Culm

Overview

This large NCA includes a long section of the Atlantic coast stretching from Barnstaple in Devon to just north of Tintagel in Cornwall. Inland, it extends as far east as the outskirts of Exeter. Apart from a short stretch around Bude in Cornwall, the coastline is covered by two AONBs, divided by the county boundary: North Devon AONB and Cornwall AONB. The south-eastern fringes of the NCA fall within Dartmoor National Park, but it accounts for only 1% of the total area of The Culm. The NCA lies within the Upland and Upland Fringe Agricultural Landscape Type, and there are areas of rough ground as a result of poorly drained and heavy soils in the valley bottoms and hilltops, which is important for the species-rich culm grasslands. The predominant agriculture is grass production, dairy, beef and sheep. There is a mixed field pattern, with small to medium, irregular fields on the valleys sides, enclosed strip fields around settlements and larger, more rectilinear fields on the valleys bottoms and hill tops. Field boundaries are dominated by hedgerows and hedgebanks. Many of the more anciently enclosed fields have wide hedgebanks. It is a rural area and sparsely populated, dominated by a dispersed settlement pattern of individual farmsteads and hamlets. There are sparsely scattered villages and market towns throughout the NCA, including Holsworthy, Great Torrington, Launceston and Okehampton. On the coast, the NCA includes the historic port of Bude as well as fishing villages and seaside resorts such as Boscastle, Bude, Clovelly and Westward Ho!, the latter a planned seaside resort of the 19th century. The road pattern of the area includes the A30 trunk road, which is the main road access through Devon and Cornwall, as well as other main roads linking historic towns. Most roads, however, are minor, linking local places and are characteristically winding, sunken lanes bordered by high hedgebanks. The NCA is well-wooded, with a total coverage of 13%, of which only 17% is ancient woodland. Deciduous woodland is found in the steep-sided river valleys, particularly of the Rivers Taw and Torridge, though some valley woodlands have been re-planted with conifers and hardwood trees. There are also substantial areas of conifer plantations, mainly on the high, poor ground.

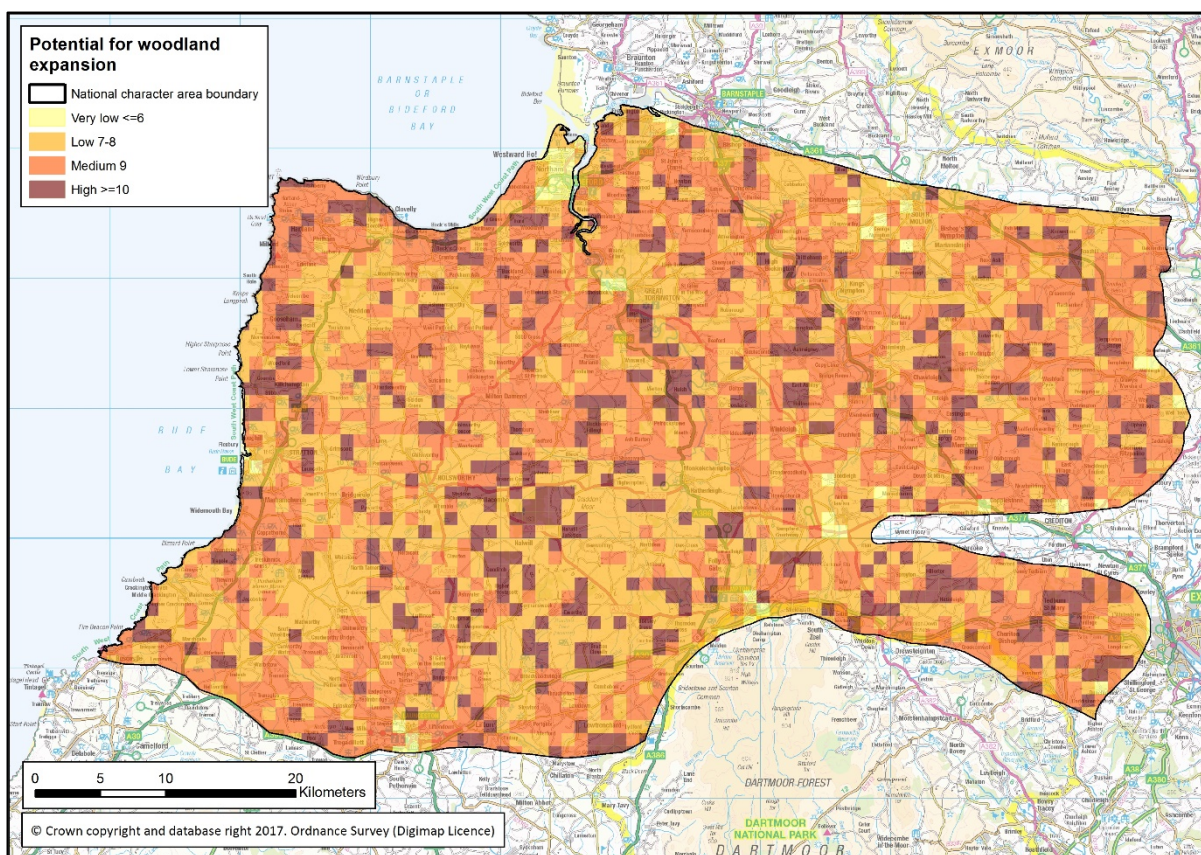
The Historic Environment Character

There is substantial evidence for Bronze Age and Iron Age activity, particularly on the higher land where earthworks survive well. Prehistoric monuments include numerous barrows, as well as hillforts, enclosures, camps, some of which have evidence for Roman-period occupation. There are several Iron Age enclosed settlements, known as Cornish rounds. The area was densely settled by the 11th century, and there is evidence of planning around central squares, known as burys, or around market places. There were medieval open fields and infield-outfield systems around many of the villages and hamlets, and these have often been fossilised in the present-day field pattern, as they were enclosed piecemeal from the late medieval period onwards. The contraction of many settlements from the 14th century onwards has left individual farmsteads where there were once hamlets. The sheep and wool industry was a significant part of the agricultural economy, with the addition of a cattle-rearing economy from the 15th century. Early watermeadow systems, including catchmeadows, developed to irrigate meadows and promote early grass growth for grazing. The traditional market centres, such as Launceston and Okehampton, developed as centres

of the local wool trade, whilst on the coast Clovelly and Bideford became prosperous ports. Coastal settlements, such as Bude, developed as seaside resorts from the 19th century.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a medium level of potential for woodland expansion within the NCA, generally scattered across the area, though mainly around areas that are already wooded. Opportunities to plant new woodland could, therefore, support those areas highlighted in the NCA profile, such as managing and extending the internationally important western oak woodlands on steep valley sides and in coastal combs. New planting could also reinforce the traditional pattern of hedgerows and hedgebanks, whilst still retaining the ancient field patterns. It is important, when designing new woodland within the NCA, to retain the sense of openness across much of the area.



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