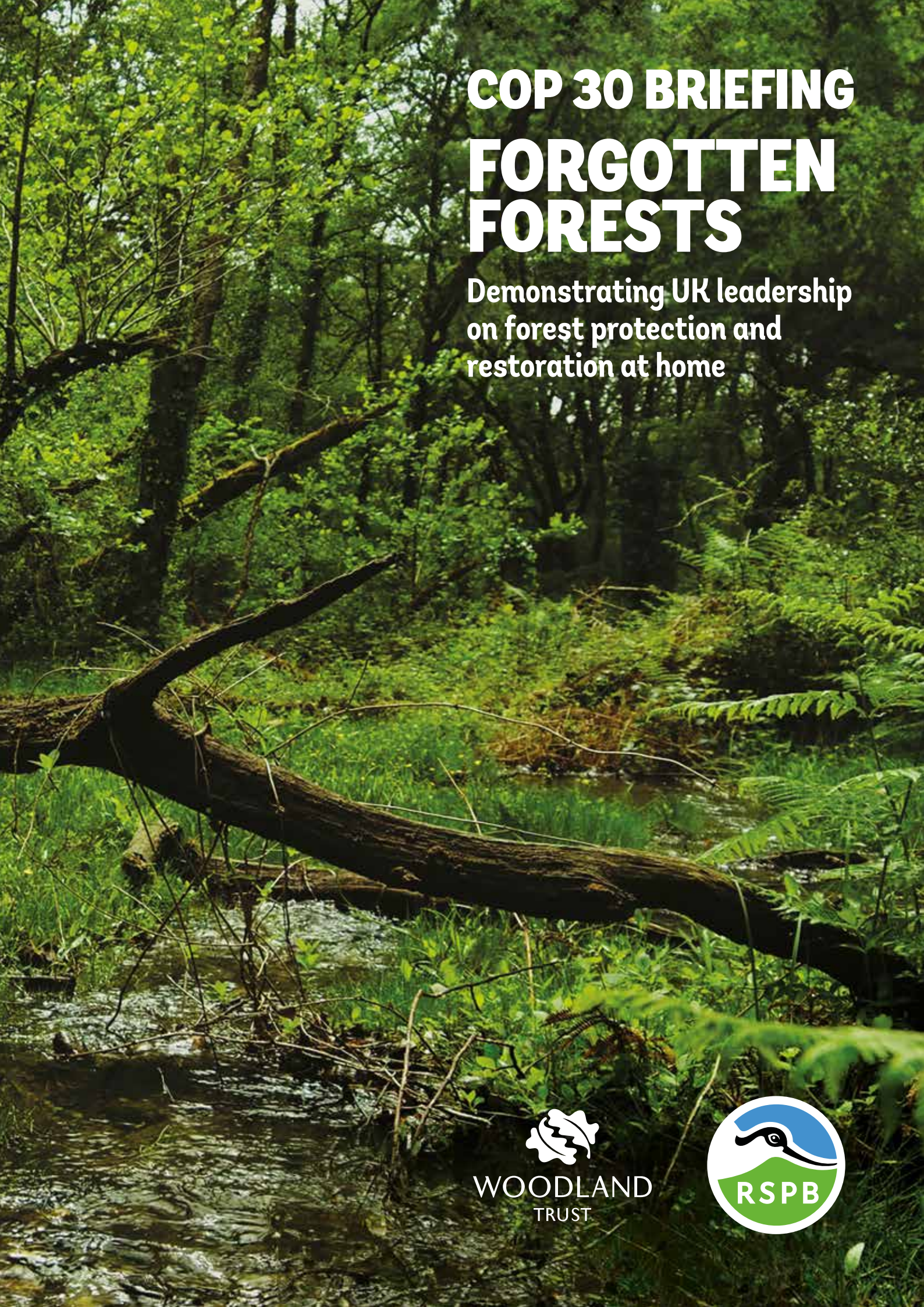

COP 30 BRIEFING

FORGOTTEN FORESTS

Demonstrating UK leadership on forest protection and restoration at home

WOODLAND TRUST

RSPB

Introduction

At COP26 in 2021, the UK as hosts provided international leadership on forest protection and restoration through the launch of the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use. At COP28, this commitment was adopted by all countries in the outcomes of the first Global Stocktake and emphasised "the importance of… enhanced efforts towards halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation by 2030".

COP30 in November 2025, will be held in Belém in Brazil. As this is located at the mouth of the Amazon River, there will be a focus on forest protection once more. Thus, this is a good moment to assess how the UK demonstrates best practice on forest protection and restoration at home.

Credibility on the international stage is predicated on investment and leadership in woodland protection and restoration at home. The UK's woodlands play a crucial role in biodiversity conservation and are the largest net carbon sinks within the UK's land use, land use change and forests sector (LULUCF). As a signatory to a range of international agreements on forest conservation focused on biodiversity conservation, sustainable development and climate change, the UK has responsibilities that extend to its own tree cover, in particular irreplaceable ancient and long-established woodland.

Ancient woodland is our oldest woodland, a product of centuries of habitat continuity and undisturbed soils. It is irreplaceable - once lost, it is lost forever.

Protecting the irreplaceable cultural and natural heritage of our ancient woodland is vital for both current and future generations. It's not just new woodland creation that can remove atmospheric carbon. The carbon stock of living trees in ancient and longstanding woodlands is predicted to double over the next 100 years. Although ancient and long-established woodland in Britain makes up only 25% of all woodland, it holds 36% of all woodland carbon.

Our ancient woodlands are one of the most important UK habitats for wildlife, including core areas of our remnant temperate rainforests and Caledonian pinewoods, and provide the last vestiges for many rare and declining species. Greater protection and recovery of ancient woodland is essential to form a solid foundation for the UK's nature to recover. They also improve our health, wellbeing and education, reduce pollution and flooding, and support people, wildlife and food production. However, they face significant threats because of the lack of legal protection and effective strategies and funding in place to support their recovery.

International context

COP30 will spotlight the role of nature and forests in international climate efforts. Global deforestation rates remain worryingly high and tackling them will be critical to delivering both the Paris Agreement and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. The UK has consistently played a leadership role in global efforts to address deforestation.

On election, the Labour Government flagged that "Britain is back" on the world stage and committed to renewed international leadership. At COP29 it announced that it would take on co-chairing the Forest Climate Leaders Partnership, a key mechanism for implementing the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration and forged new strong links with Brazil. The Government now has the opportunity to work closely with the Brazilian presidency on nature and forests which is one of the presidency's key priorities.

The UK's credibility in this space will be partly dependent on delivery at home. The UK has very low woodland cover and the Climate Change Committee highlights that it is far off track in delivering its own reforestation targets. Furthermore, UK policy exacerbates forest loss globally by continuing to subsidise the combustion of imported woody biomass in the Drax energy plant.

2025 is a critical year for the UK to substantially ramp up its action on domestic woodland protection and creation to address domestic biodiversity and climate goals and secure its credibility on the international stage going into COP30.

Current state of UK ancient woodland

- **Coverage:** Forests and woodland cover 13% of the UK's land surface, compared to a global average of 31%. Half of this is predominantly native tree species (in native woodlands), the other half predominantly non-natives (mainly as commercial timber plantations).
- **Ancient woodland:** Ancient woods are one of the UK's richest and most complex habitats and are home to more threatened species than any other. However, they cover only 2.5% of the UK's land area. This includes internationally important temperate rainforests along the west coast of the UK and globally important Caledonian pinewood, unique only to Scotland.

Threats

- **Development:** According to Woodland Trust records, over 1,000 ancient woodlands are under threat from development across the UK.
- **Plantation forestry:** Almost half of the remaining ancient woodlands are damaged by either plantations of non-native trees (through direct over-planting or encroachment from nearby productive forests) and/or invasion of non-native species like rhododendron.
- **Pests and disease:** A reliance on imported trees for planting is driving an accelerating and unsustainable level of new pests and disease introductions, leading to widespread loss of trees on ancient woodland sites. This is compounded by over-browsing by deer, sheep and grey squirrels. This is undermining climate and nature goals.
- **Lack of appropriate management:** Only 7% of native and ancient woodlands are in good ecological condition.

Current protection

- **Legislation:** Despite ancient woodland only covering 2.5% of the UK, it has very little legal protection from damage and loss.
  - **Protected areas:** Only a small proportion of ancient woodland is protected through the designation of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), and Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs). National parks and other land use designation provide no legal protection for ancient woodland.
  - **Forestry legislation:** Forestry legislation across the UK provides very limited protection for ancient woodland and has major gaps between what is deemed legal and what is sustainable. For example, it legally permits for the continued decline and eventual loss of this habitat to commercial forestry across most of the UK.
  - **Planning policy:** Ancient woodland has no specific legal protection beyond limited planning policy protection. This varies considerably across the four nations through respective planning frameworks and in England as an irreplaceable habitat within Biodiversity Net Gain.

Global leadership at home: Our key recommendations to deliver effective and timely recovery of the UK's most important woodland for nature, climate and people are:

1. **A recovery plan for ancient woodland:** Country level strategies to identify, catalogue and recover remaining ancient woodlands for future generations and delivery of national and international commitments on biodiversity and forests.
2. **New legal protection:** Modernise country level forestry and planning legislation to recognise the irreplaceable value of ancient woodlands and protect from the ongoing neglect, damaging management and loss.
3. **Research and monitoring:** Commitment to funding Forest Research to develop new evidence to monitor the state of ancient woodland and different approaches to support their recovery in a changing climate.
4. **Balanced policy and funding:** Rebalance woodland policy and funding priorities to ensure existing ancient woodland is prioritised alongside the current focus on tree cover expansion. To meet the Government's target to bring the majority of damaged ancient woodland in England into recovery would cost approximately £250 million, which is less than the estimated cost of one mile of HS2.

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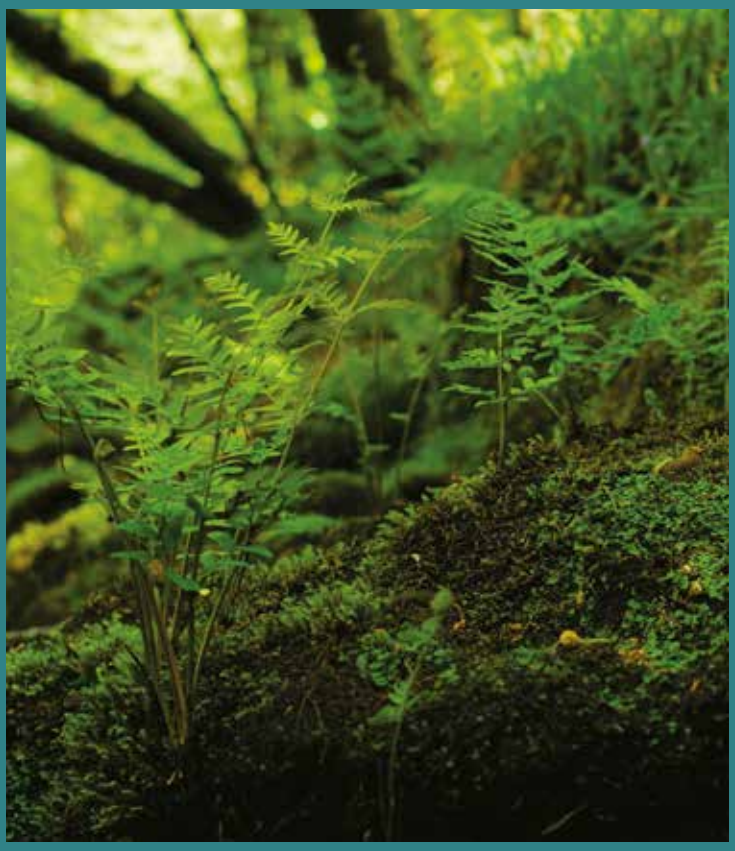

Final words

The protection and recovery of UK ancient woodlands are essential for supporting biodiversity, adapting to and mitigating climate change, and enhancing people's lives. Caring for our most important ancient woodland habitats is also a fundamental step to enabling existing woodland wildlife to thrive and be able to move into the new tree cover being created now. The cost of acting to save this irreplaceable part of our natural heritage is small, but the cost of not acting will be felt by future generations.

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