

NOTES EMERGING FROM THE OAK RESILIENCE WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS

27th FEBRUARY, ALTON



Background

Why did we hold a workshop? The research approach we use in our Oak Resilience investigations is holistic, interdisciplinary and follows a systems model. A part of this approach is proactive, pre-project engagement with the wider stakeholder group, as well as end of project knowledge transfer and exchange. Attendees at this meeting were thus asked to participate in an interactive workshop that would go some way to meeting both these objectives. Participants were allocated to groups to ensure that there was a mix of practitioners, policy makers and scientists at each of the seven tables around which discussions were held. The questions for discussions were identified from the Action Oak Knowledge Review and other recent relevant research. Four questions were posed, two tables addressed the first three questions and one table addressed question four. Forty minutes were allocated to discuss the questions given to the groups allocated, facilitated by a chair at each table and a notetaker recorded point made. These together with the questions are outlined below.

Question 1:

How best can awareness of oak health and the threats oaks face be raised? What is currently being done and working, and what more could be done?

- Should specific groups/stakeholders/publics be targeted first?
- What is working at present – do you have examples?
- What more could be done?

The key points raised by two groups fell into five key themes.

1. Developing and disseminating messages/campaigns

It was felt that there was a need for targeted campaigns to raise awareness about threats to oak health and the importance of biosecurity behaviours. Also, to create positive messages concerning good woodland management, it was thought this could be done through practical case studies. Information boards in forests was another suggestion. A step change in using technology to reach the wider public was tabled with examples of electronic tree identifiers and the Australian example where street trees in Melbourne were given email addresses allowing local people to report issues. However, people sent letters and poems to the trees as well as raising issues concerning the health of the trees. It was suggested we need to differentiate between woodland management from common messaging that is circulating that felling trees is always bad.

2. Education – bridging gaps

Engagement via education with publics and schools were suggested with a need to target younger children to spend time in nature, to understand what a healthy woodland is rather than just seeing it as something green within the landscape, and to raise awareness of what woodland management involves. It was also argued that there should be integration of education concerning forests into the wider curriculum. However, time to engage with schools about trees and forests was said to be very limited with a question raised of whether government employees should be given more time to engage with schools and local communities, with the Forestry Commission potentially playing a larger role. Current forest district offices and visitor centres could have more dedicated staff for public engagement.

3. Targeting specific groups

Groups to be targeted with key messages were thought to include: the wider public, funders who might support research or action on the ground, land managers, and woodland owners. The Action Oak partnership has already identified key audiences to target with messaging on oak health.

4. Research

Getting key messages from the research out to land managers was considered important. It was suggested that understanding the complexity of the environment was critical not just the trees that are under threat i.e. a holistic look at the whole system. A need to connect and apply science to woodland management was raised.

5. Key messengers

Overall stakeholders thought there needed to be a diversification and diversity of messengers in order to reach wider groups, suggesting that the messenger is very important in reaching targeted audiences and in being trusted. At present it was felt we often preach to the converted with organisational reach limited to their members or networks. These more diverse messengers could be from conservation bodies, forest management organisations and the government. Specific groups mentioned included the National Tree Safety Group, the Action Oak partnership was also mentioned, as well as the Forestry Industry Safety Accord. It was recognised that agreeing the messages was important so as not to create confusion, others suggested that one voice or a recognised authority was needed.

Question 2:

Should threats to oak be considered in isolation (i.e. do they merit special attention) or as part of a general concern focused on tree health?

- Can more traction be gained from focusing in on oak specifically?
- What might be the consequences of this?
- Or the consequences of a wider focus on tree health?

The key points raised by two groups fell into three key themes.

6. Pros of focusing on oak specifically

The potential benefits of focusing on oak and oak health were said to include its iconic status, its public visibility, its historic and cultural importance, the fact that it is recognised and valued by many and can therefore draw people in and once drawn in we can talk about wider tree health issues. Oak is the 'panda' equivalent and a flagship species and there is an opportunity to build on this. Oak is distributed across the UK and is found in all landscapes – forests, parks, urban, and there is an opportunity to 'big up' oak as ash trees are being felled and tree diseases are part of a national conversation. There is potential to gain more public funding (rather than from funding bodies) with a focus on oak. Oak has more common ground with people than other species. Action Oak is an example of raising the profile of oak. Failing to save oaks would be a public relations disaster, however its often a crisis that leads to funding and action. Woodland Heritage has an awareness of AOD and helped to lever in funding for research.

7. Cons of focusing on oak specifically

Other trees are important and maybe neglected if there is too much focus on oak. Oak is not a commercial crop in many areas. Conifer research is less attractive for funding but is a sustainable industry, so we should not just make the case for oak. Potential for funding fatigue for oak as a large amount of money has been spent on oak already.

8. Oak collaborative research

The collaborative research group working on oak is a great example of getting different specialists together, which could be a model for other work. This oak work has triggered a wider study which informs biodiversity/soils. Future species selection as part of this research is very important.

Question 3:

How best might the more inactive (in terms of woodland management) tree and woodland owners/managers be engaged to take action for oak health?

- Would this best be done by direct appeal regarding tree health or oak specific or a more general encouragement to manage and care for woodland?
- What measures/approaches/interventions might encourage these groups to manage the risks posed by oak related pests and diseases?
- Do we know what we should be asking land managers to do?

The key points raised by two groups fell into five key themes.

9. In difficult and complex problems management and care of woodland is not straightforward

There is a lot of detail, but no clear message of what oak decline is and questions about the beetles and bacteria are they secondary, do we need to trap them. There is no single management solution, a clear definition of the treescape environment is required (i.e. woodland (ASNW), plantation, parkland, urban forests, gardens, single trees). Stakeholders should recognise that it is good management practice to reduce stresses on their trees and strive for better tree health. There are opportunities with a new generation of managers. However, there is quite a lot of unmanaged and untouched woodland for various reasons, some that belonged to farms that had pursued a policy of no interference or small woodland owners who let nature take its course. In some instances, farmland was sold to large organisations that had no interest in managing the woodlands. There is fragmentation and woodland forming in pockets are bypassed. Farms are not often run with mixed interest; they focus often on intensive cropping. Action Oak Demonstration sites could be used to illustrate good practice as well as be used for research purposes. There was some concern that protected species prevents management in some instances and that deer management is needed.

10. Incentives to support action for tree health

It was thought that current incentive schemes such as Countryside Stewardship are too bureaucratic, however it was thought financial incentives to manage are important, but current schemes were thought to be too reactive. Online tools could be used to show people the range of incentives available. Support could be given for those applying for incentives to manage for tree health. A change in mind set was suggested with the need to take a long-term view and weigh up how much effort and expense people are prepared to go to, to protect oaks. Non-financial incentives such as an award schemes relating to woodland health on a scale of 1-10 might reward good tree health management – ‘it’s not always about money’.

11. Communication and guidance

It was thought that relatively simple sets of messages should be created and come from many organisations via cross organisation cooperation. At present many organisations are not joined up and not giving out the same messages. This could be encouraged by locally driven dialogue, identifying key organisations that land managers take notice of. Open debate is needed with all types of groups to establish different forms of appropriate management. Too many different messages create confusion. Also need to consider that some managers, farmers may not be interested in reading information so other ways to reach them are important. There was a suggestion to influence elected members such as politicians. Guidance and information need to be simple and easy to access, now FC information is on the dot gov website it is less accessible to many people. Oak is an emblematic species and could be used as a template for action on all tree species.

12. Existing knowledge and expertise

It was argued that existing knowledge and expertise should not be forgotten, archive information was thought to be important. With complex issues consideration is needed about management practices, economics, biodiversity, and in these instances, people want more prescriptive recommendations.

13. Conservation and citizen science

There was a desire to learn from experience for example there was non-intervention in Ireland – early succession impacted bird species (in a good way?). Getting citizen scientists involved was considered important, an annual bird survey would be useful due to the idea ‘if the birds are right the woods are right’. New technologies might also have the potential to assist with data gathering via artificial intelligence, for example.

Question 4:

Is there a role for networks or groups at a local or regional level in raising awareness about oak health and encouraging landowners/stakeholders to take action for oak health?

- How might this be encouraged or facilitated?
- Who should lead any network?
- Could this happen through existing networks at a local level (Action Oak partnership, Local nature partnerships, Small Woods, Royal Forestry Society, Confor, London Tree Officers Association etc.) or do we need new networks?
- What might these networks/groups do?

The key points raised by one group fell into four key themes.

14. Role for networks/groups

It was suggested that a single coordinator for activities to disseminate information and act as a gateway to other sources would be useful. This would provide better curation of information. There was a need to bring organisations' communication leads together. Networks or groups need a funded and dedicated lead that can provide better knowledge exchange and trusted, reliable, and unbiased sources of information.

15. Potential network leads

Forest Research was felt to be a good network facilitator and could ensure broad remit and inclusivity. Any lead needs to be trusted and a reliable conduit for knowledge exchange, with a role in myth busting and should operate across the UK. However, it was acknowledged that choosing a lead could be contentious.

16. Using existing networks/groups

There are lots of regional groups. Perhaps these are too diffuse? How information is disseminated and who it gets to depend on the membership of each network/group. There are many disparate knowledge hubs – we need one source. It was thought the industry is currently a little fragmented. Digests provided by groups such as the Institute of Chartered Foresters was felt to be useful.

17. Network/group actions

Actions groups/networks can undertake include linking research, management, policy, knowledge exchange. Focus on oak but also other species. Provide user friendly knowledge exchange and networking days rather than information heavy sessions and provide web/video-based materials to reduce need for meetings, as well as provide policy guidance to land managers.

The next steps

The above issues raised in the workshop are being sent to all those who attend the event, including Defra colleagues. It provides those interested in Oak Health with some key issues to potentially focus on in the future. Forest Research (FR) has bid for BBSRC Research Council funding and has just heard that it has been successful. Part of the research FR will be doing involves working with a range of policy makers, practitioners and scientists to explore how these groups can come together and exchange knowledge in effective and user-friendly ways, find out who/where practitioners look to for information and advice, and work towards creating some key simple messaging. We thus hope to work with many of you again in the near future and thank you for helping us lay this foundation to our new research project.