

Wales Upland Ecosystem Group Priority Action

Nant Gwynant Rhododendron Management

Rhododendron ponticum poses a threat to habitats and their associated species over large areas of Snowdonia National Park. It primarily impacts on woodlands in the valleys bottoms and on heathlands higher up the hill slopes, although grasslands and some wetland habitats are also affected by its spread.

Rhododendron invasion can cause both habitat degradation and in the long-term habitat loss. Rhododendron out-competes heather and other heathland plants and can form a dense layer allowing very little light to penetrate through its thick leaf canopy. Heather is particularly susceptible to shading and in time the heathland vegetation is suppressed or lost completely with a corresponding decline in associated fauna such as red grouse *Lagopus lagopus* of which there is a small population in the area. In addition rhododendron prevents grazing by livestock thus reducing the agricultural value of the land and the management required to maintain open heath. A more recent and potentially serious issue is the spread of the *Phytophthora* pathogens; *P. ramorum*, *P. kernoviae* and *P. pseudosyringae*. Rhododendron is a host for these *Phytophthora* and is able to spread the disease to native plants. All three *Phytophthora* species have been shown to cause damage to bilberry in the wild although *P. ramorum* has only been found on bilberry in woodland the other two species have been found on open heath. As bilberry is a significant component of heathland in this area the prospect of Rhododendron acting as a conduit for their expansion into heathland is of great concern.

The Nant Gwynant and Nantmor area includes some large blocks of upland heath which in the absence of rhododendron would be considered of very high quality. A particular concern is the spread of rhododendron into the species-rich oceanic heathland (H21 *Calluna vulgaris* – *Vaccinium myrtillus* – *Sphagnum capillifolium* heath) on Moel Meirch with its population of *Juniperus communis*. Some areas are already highly infested with dense rhododendron such as Mynydd Sygun near Beddgelert. In other areas rhododendron is beginning to spread into good quality habitat such as along the Afon Llynedno. Control, principally by the National Trust, has been very successful in Nant Gwynant but reinvasion by rhododendron as a result of high seed production on neighbouring land reduces the effectiveness of control measures and adds to ongoing costs.

The priority area has been selected to include large blocks of heathland where control has already started and needs to continue and areas where rhododendron has recently been detected spreading into uncolonised heathland where early action could prevent further habitat degradation. Nantgwynant is a particularly well-visited and striking landscape within the National Park, and includes part of the Coedydd Derw Meirionnydd and Eryri Special Areas of Conservation. The priority areas also includes Coederyr, owned by the Forestry Commission, which is believed to be one of the main seed sources for rhododendron in the project area, and an area where control will be key to controlling Rhododendron in Nantgwynant.

The project would require partnership working between NT, SNPA, CCW, FCW and private landowners, funding from an external source and a commitment by FCW to tackle the seed source in Coederyr.

Required Action

- Review rhododendron maps and strategy
- Programme of rhododendron control in woodlands and heathlands
- Introduction of effective after treatment grazing (infra structure for grazing)

- Publicity and education with local community and visitors

Species Interest

Key S42 species

Juniper

Juniperus communis

Red grouse

Lagopus lagopus