Richmond upon Thames
Habitat Action Plan
Ancient Parkland & Veteran Trees

Species Action Plan for Wild Black Poplar *(Populus nigra ssp. betulifolia)*

(Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew specimen of Wild Black Poplar collected from Richmond Park in 1929)

1. Aims

- To contribute to the conservation of wild black poplar in the UK through protection and maintenance of the population in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames.
- To raise awareness and increase knowledge of the black poplar.

2. Introduction

The wild black poplar (Populus nigra ssp. betulifolia) was formerly a component of floodplain woodland but now occurs as isolated specimens in wet meadows, along hedgerows, beside ponds, near to rivers and in amenity plantings. It has not reproduced naturally for many centuries and its current distribution reflects the once common practice of striking cuttings for use mainly around farms. It has been in decline for the last 200 years and is now one of the rarest trees in the UK. There are so few wild black poplars left that it is unlikely they will pollinate each other, instead the large numbers of introduced cultivated trees will pollinate them. Subsequently due to this and loss of the specific habitat conditions required for germination there are rarely any new truly wild black poplars. Our surviving trees are an even aged population, most have reached old age and mortality rates are high for a variety of reasons.

3. Current Status

3.1 Current Status - National

There are an estimated 8000 wild black poplars in Britain, chiefly occurring south of a line from the Mersey to the Wash. Many of these are believed to be genetic clones so probably considerably less distinct genotypes exist. The tree has strongholds in Cheshire, the Vale of Aylesbury, East Anglia and Greater London. The genus is dioecious (either male or female) and female trees are particularly rare, with an estimated 400 nationally. Britain's intensively managed rivers have lacked suitable habitats for centuries and consequently, the current population reflects former planting preferences rather than any natural distribution pattern. Planting has been restricted to vegetative cuttings, and this is main reason why genetic diversity is low. In addition there has been very little planting of new trees until recently. Hybrid crosses of the European black poplar (*Populus nigra ssp. typica*) and the American cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) have been extensively planted in place of the native tree over the last 200 years. There has been much misidentification of hybrids as natives and *vice versa*. A large number of street trees in Manchester have recently succumbed to a disease called Poplar Scab (*Venturia populina*), it is not clear at present whether the disease will affect other parts of the country, especially eastern areas where the drier climate and wider spacing between trees could its limit its ability to spread.

3.2 Current Status – Local

The number of wild black poplars in Richmond Borough is the highest of all London boroughs. Kew Gardens has a selection of trees grown from cuttings taken from across the country and Richmond Park has veteran females as well as recent plantings. The population on the Thames at Barnes is arguably the most important due to its many veteran females of unique clones which because of their location and spacing are likely to be the relic of a natural population. There are a number of veteran and mature trees scattered across other areas of the borough. In c.2001 a propagation programme was initiated by the Royal Parks using cuttings taken from within Richmond Park. These trees were planted within the park and distributed via local organisations for planting along the Thames and at LA parks. There have been concerns that cuttings were sourced from too small a selection of parent trees in the borough and that not enough planting is being undertaken to maintain the present population. Due to the location of many trees within areas of high human habitation there are also difficult issues with health and safety during pruning/removal works.

4. Specific factors affecting the species

- Loss of both natural river systems and unstable floodplain sediments results in an absence of suitable habitat for natural regeneration.
- Lack of identification skills.
- Introduction of pests and diseases due to human or climatic factors.
- The lack of native male trees in close proximity to native females means there is very little opportunity for fertilisation.
- The presence of large numbers of hybrid trees means that seed from female trees is very likely to be hybridised.
- There are losses of trees from natural factors such as age, drought and windblow.

- Removal or too heavy reductions of trees to meet health and safety criteria.
- Removal of fallen trees which would otherwise survive in situ or regenerate from the stump.
- The widely dispersed population makes site based conservation more difficult.
- Widely available and commercially preferable hybrids have been planted in preference to native stock for the last 150 years.
- The majority of the natural population are at the end of their lifespans with few mature or semi mature trees for continuity.

5. Current action

5.1 Legal Status

Section 13 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended, prohibits the unauthorised uprooting of any wild plant species. Black poplars are not on Schedule 8 of the Act (those protected from any picking, uprooting or destruction) and only benefit from the general protection mentioned above. Some trees may be protected using Tree Preservation Orders under the Town and Country Planning (Trees) Regulations 1999. These are normally only served where it is known that a tree is under threat from felling. Some trees may lie within Conservation Areas associated with villages and flood meadows and would be afforded some protection. A Felling licence (Forestry Act 1967) may be required if a landowner wished to fell a number of trees. Where a Black poplar grows within a hedgerow the Hedgerows Regulations Act 1997 would afford some protection to the tree and hedge.

5.2 Local actions

- Dissemination of information to owners of trees on an ad hoc basis.
- Royal Parks propagation programme from trees within the park.
- The locations and parentage of most of these newly planted trees is recorded.
- Activities are usually co-ordinated through the BAP partnership.

6. Actions

Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that could be involved in the process of implementing the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcomed and needed. The leads identified are responsible for co-ordinating the actions - but are not necessarily implementers.

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
RBP01 - Survey and map the existing population of black poplars in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames	2011	JS	LA RP
RBP02 – Identify the clones of black poplars (esp the older	2011/12	KA	JS LA RP

specimens**)** in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames			
RBP03 – Implement a propagation programme for new black poplars and invite requests from outside the borough	2012/13	RP RBGK	JS
RBP04 – Implement a replanting programme for new black poplars	2015/16	LA	TCV JS
RBP05 – Produce an educational leaflet on black poplars and their importance	2012	LA	JS RP
RBP06 – Organise a celebratory event for black poplars in 2013	2013	LA	TCV RP

7. Relevant Action Plans

7.1 Local Plans

Broadleaved Woodland HAP; Veteran Trees / Ancient Parkland HAP; Tidal Thames HAP.

7.2 London Plans

Black poplar SAP; Tidal Thames HAP; Grazing marsh and floodplain grassland.

7.3 National Plans

Wet woodland; Rivers & Streams.

8. Key References

- Cooper.F. (2006). The black poplar: ecology, history and conservation.
- Mabey.R. (1996). The native black poplar: a species in the ghetto. British Wildlife.
- Spencer.J. (1994). The native black poplar in Britain: an action plan for its conservation. English Nature.
- London Species Action Plan.
- Sussex Species Action Plan.

9. Organisations and abbreviations

TCV –Trust for Conservation Volunteers
JS – Jamie Simpson
KA – Ken Adams

LA – Local Authority
RBGK – Royal Botanic Gardens Kew
RP – Royal Parks

10. Contact

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