

Dales Woodland Cleared Of Plastic Eyesores

Friends of the Dales members and guests have helped to remove some 1,500 redundant tree guards from a wood near Settle. The event (held before the coronavirus “lockdown” guidance was issued) was part of the charity’s campaign to reduce the use of plastic in the national park. It was held just before the coronavirus lockdown forced it to postpone or cancel events for the foreseeable future.

The privately owned woodland was planted with 40,000 deciduous trees in the winter of 2002, each of which was supported and sheltered by a plastic guard. These were promoted as being photo-degradable at the time but, as our volunteers discovered, almost 20 years after their installation they remained robust and required cutting from the established specimens that no longer needed their protection. If the guards had been left in situ, they would probably have endured for decades in the woodland, damaging the visual quality of the landscape and tainting the ground. Many would eventually have been blown into nearby watercourses.

On the day we discussed the Friends of the Dales three-point campaign for reducing the use of plastic guards, which starts with encouraging the forestry sector and landowners to plant trees without protection. Equally effective ways of establishing new woodlands could include erecting deer-proof fencing and increasing the density of saplings, while accepting that some of them will be lost.

The second point is that if individual tree protection is needed, it should be provided by something that is not made from non-compostable plastic. We believe that the onus should be on the suppliers of guards, encouraged by regulation, to develop such materials. Perversely, current grants for tree planting often stipulate that plastic products must be used.

The final point of our campaign is that where such guards are already in place and cannot be composted, they should be removed for responsible disposal when redundant. This is not currently a mandatory requirement. Although the terms of grants for woodland planting may stipulate that plastic tree guards should be removed there is no effective verification or, for example, holding back of monies to ensure that this happens.

Our event was essentially about putting into effect the third point of the campaign. We were helped in this by the supplier company Tubex, which offered to provide some of the bags for collecting the tree guards and to have them picked up from the woodland gates. These were then taken to a facility as part of a recycling trial it is running. These measures are important because over the last 25 years various organisations have installed an estimated 3 million plastic tree guards within the Yorkshire Dales National Park. About one third of these are now thought to be redundant and ready for removal, collection and either reuse or recycling.

Our volunteers enjoyed their day even though the work was quite physically demanding. On leaving the woodland they were able to look back at a more attractive stand of trees and see that they had cleared a significant area of the Dales of plastic.

Mark Corner, Trustee, Friends of the Dales April 2020



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Paul Milling and Colin Priestley

Great team work!



Peter Hardyman – regular volunteer

Gets the better of a reluctant tree guard



Kate Jennings

A small part of the stack she collected



Mark Corner

Trustee and woodland owner host for the day



Bruce McLeod

Chair of Friends of the Dales and campaign leader



Bernard Peel and Marion Temple

Bernard is a regular volunteer, Marion is a Trustee



Dragging the full bags of “telescoped” tree guards to the gate ready for collection and onwards recycling