

## **Traditional coppice in South East England: the importance of workforce engagement for development**

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This paper describes research into the historic importance of the coppice industry, now largely restricted to south east England and the relevance of this to current rural development policy. The economic and social contexts have altered significantly over time with product substitution and changing consumer aspirations, and particularly the availability of alternative fuel sources. Over the last fifty years the 'value' attached to coppiced woodlands has shifted away from resource exploitation and towards a greater appreciation of them for wildlife, recreation, amenity and cultural heritage. This has increased wider public awareness of and appreciation for coppicing as a management technique and, consequently rising concern over the reduction in area managed. This was assumed to be due market failure but attempts to reverse this by creating new outlets failed. The reason for this has been explored by investigating the history of the industry and engaging directly with the workforce, both individually and in focus groups. Coppice workers were found to be more numerous, active and enterprising than previously thought and many were found to be working in family groups servicing traditional markets. They were unaware of concerns about decline in the area coppiced or initiatives to address it. Issues currently affecting their businesses included housing costs, rural crime, harvesting restrictions, loss of yards and training needs. It is concluded that Government policies to promote woodfuel are not likely to succeed without active engagement with the workforce to understand their perspectives and enabling them to participate in policy decisions is recommended.