

## Single-Use Plastic Tree Guards – A Contentious Topic ....

The popularity of the Sandstone Ridge is not in doubt, not least its woodlands (*including ancient woodland*). The Ridge has a higher woodland cover (13%) than the England average of 10%, and much higher than the 4% cover across Cheshire. This contrasts with the EU average of 37%. Nationwide plans by the Woodland Trust, for example, to plant 50 million trees over the next 5 years, and the National Trust to plant 20 million trees over the next ten, will be welcome news to many.



A key benefit of this planting programme is in the battle to slow climate change through carbon capture. There are multiple benefits elsewhere, particularly for biodiversity, habitat connectivity, flood management, soil quality, amenity, and recreation value, to name but a few.

As many of you will know, tree planting involves the widespread use of plastic tree guards. These guards are used primarily to prevent grazing and damage by mammals and to provide a sheltered, micro-habitat for growth. That said, we must all share the dismay of travelling through the countryside to see sites of newly planted trees festooned with plastic tubing, or whilst walking through an established woodland, see hundreds of brittle, fragmenting tubes littering the ground (*see image below*).



*Old tree guards, between Harthill and Raw Head*

It is somewhat ironic that, on the one hand, the planting of trees is widely seen as environmentally beneficial, but, on the other hand, a source of vast quantities of plastic waste. The use of tree guards is not in question, rather the responsible use of plastic tree guards and the removal of disintegrating guards and/or possible recycling of such guards when they have served their useful purpose.

This contentious topic is being addressed. Organisations are keenly aware of the issue and are currently undertaking research into biodegradable guards and better understanding of tree species requirements for healthy growth. In addition to trialling new guard materials, the Woodland Trust, amongst others, is examining alternatives to the use of tree shelters, such as the wider use of natural regeneration, fencing, changing planting densities and so on. Their sites are checked regularly by site managers and they collect and replace any damaged guards before they become litter.

The Scottish Findhorn-based charity Trees for Life has planted more than 1.6 million trees in the Highlands as part of efforts to regenerate native forests. It is reported to rarely use plastic tree tubes. Instead, it uses fencing to keep hungry deer away from saplings.

The arguments for and against plastic guard use are as varied as they are complex, and there is still much to be done.