FOLLOW UP

Try to find documentary evidence, such as early maps, that can confirm the age of your hedge. Your local library may be able to help with that and you may be able to arrange a visit to the county records office.

Maps opposite show changes in a hedgerow. Top to bottom 1874 - 1914 - 1961

Further Reading

BNA Members may be interested in the lecture given when Dr. Hooper was presented with the Peter Scott Memorial Award 2004. This may be found on the website under *Members Area> Papers>*.

Hedges
The original book by E. Pollard, M. D. Hooper, & N. W. Moore is now available as a Print on Demand hardback.

ISBN: 978-0-00-731112-5
The New Naturalists Online
Pub date: 22 June 2009
This edition is exclusive to newnaturalists.com.
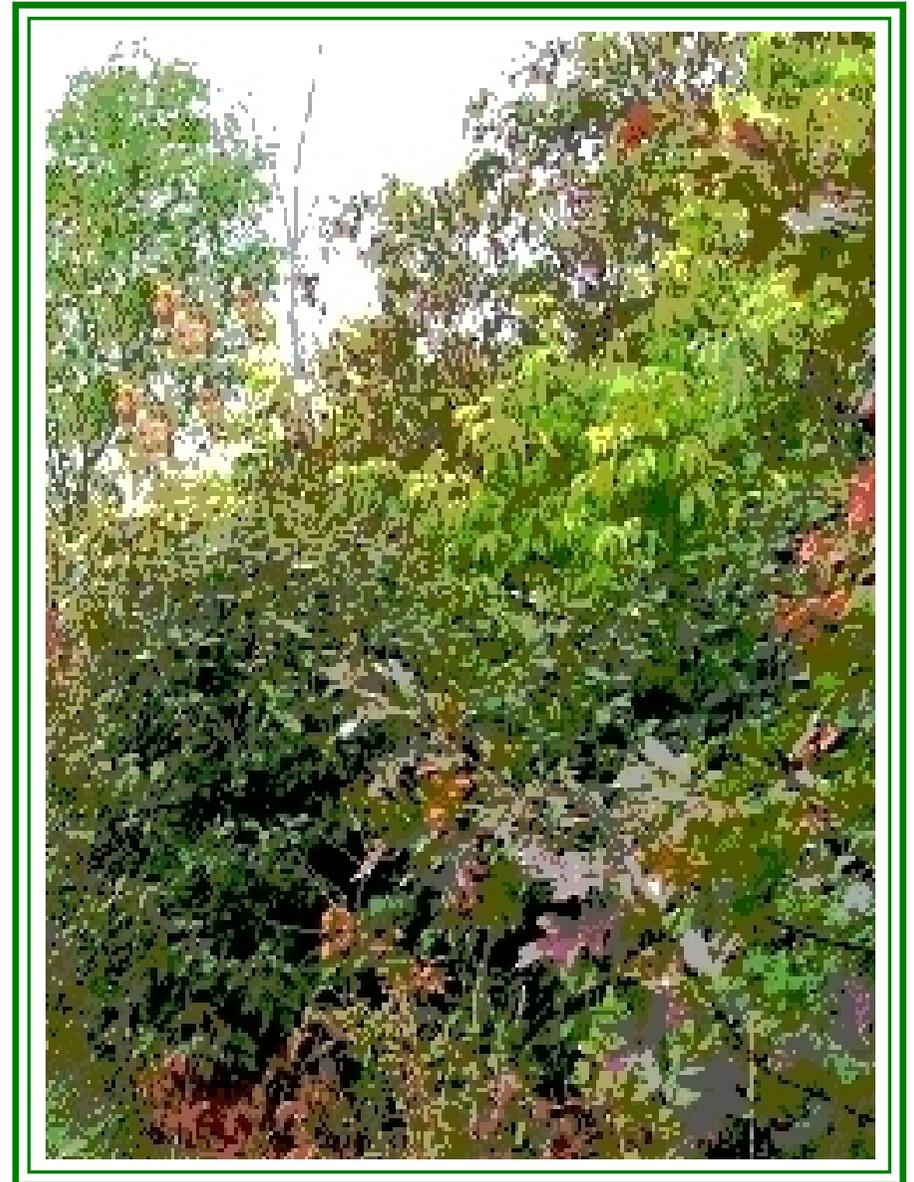
DATE A HEDGE
British Naturalists' Association

BACKGROUND

'Hooper's Law' gives us a way to estimate the age of a hedgerow. Strange though it sounds you can get an idea as to how old a hedge is by just counting the number of different species of tree and shrub in a stretch of hedge. Dr. Max Hooper, one of BNAs Honorary Fellows, published his original formula in the book *Hedges* in 1974.

Dr. Hooper's scheme is important not least for its potential use in determining what an important hedgerow is, given their protection in The Hedgerows Regulations (1997; No. 1160) of the Department of the Environment, based on age and other factors.

This method is only a rule of thumb, and can be off by a couple of centuries; so it should always be backed up by documentary evidence, and other factors taken into account. Caveats include the fact that hedgerows with elm, and hedgerows in the north of England tend not to follow the rule as closely.

The formula also does not work on hedges more than a thousand years old. In addition some hedges planted by farmers for stock control tend to be mono-species, hawthorn, blackthorn, and (in the southwest) hazel.

CHALLENGE: CAN YOU TELL HOW OLD A HEDGE IS FROM THE TREES GROWING IN IT?

MATERIALS

Canes, or similar,
(to use as markers).
A tape measure.
Clip boards
Paper and pencils.
Thin white card (optional).
Clear sticky tape.
Tree identification guide.

Later
A calculator (optional).

PREPARATION

Group size
This activity is suitable for any size of group.

Site
There is no preparation required other than finding a suitable site. This may be a country lane, edge of common land or a park. Ideally it should be as long as possible – at least several hundred feet, and away from motorised traffic.

ACTION

Explain to the group they are going to survey a hedge and try and find out how old it is.

The simplest method of doing this is to count the number of species of tree or shrub found in a 100 ft (30.5 meters) length of hedge.

Divide the group into working parties and get each to mark out a 100 ft (30.5 m) length of hedgerow. They then work their way along the hedge listing each species of tree or shrub. (Some trees you may not immediately identify at species level, e.g. there are thought to be some twenty different species of willows native to the British Isles.)

When finished each group can count the number of different species found. For each species you can add a hundred years – so if a hedge has oak, elm ash, hawthorn, field maple, hazel, blackthorn, rose and spindle it may be 9x100 = 900 years old; an ancient hedge. If it only has hawthorn, blackthorn and ash it may be 300 years old, relatively recent and possibly planted as an enclosure hedge.

One derivative of the formula, which is suggested as being more accurate, is to multiply the number of species by 99 years and then deduct sixteen. This can be done later and the results compared.

RELATED ACTIVITIES

Sufficient data will have been collected to work out also the commonest and rarest species in the hedge. This can be expressed diagrammatically in various ways

You can enter the data into a spreadsheet and generate various diagrams.
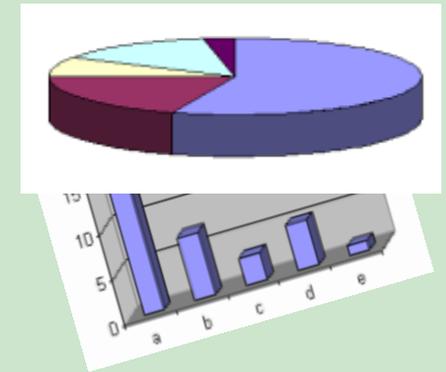
The group can collect leaves of the various species. These can be taped onto the card and identified later.