

Name: Community Woodlands Association

Place: Nationwide

Headline: Representative organisation for community woodland groups

Keywords: representation, change, support, networks

What is the context?

Historical. Before the mid 90s there were a few community land and woodland projects, then in a short while several more developed, and there was a sense of a bit of a movement building. At this stage there were two factors, which helped to jump start CWA

1. Reforesting Scotland had grown out of the environmental movement of 80s (reacting against the practices of mainstream industrial forestry), and had developed a social agenda.
2. Lottery funding, channelled through Millennium Forest for Scotland, created a substantial investment in environmental and social forestry, and encouraged new groups to develop.

There was a perceived need to network the existing and developing groups. RS took some MFS cash to bring the groups together, and then the groups decided to self-organise, and CWA was established in 2003, comprising both woodland owners and those who aspired to become owners or managers. CWA's arrival was welcomed by HIE and FCS, as providing a single voice for a growing movement.

Current: Parallel thinking in other sectors led to other representative groups emerging (e.g. Development Trusts, transport, recycling, energy). A mix of self-organised and top down organisations. These are largely sector specific networks, and CWA is well established as the woodland network within an umbrella network, with specific ties to Forestry Commission Scotland as the sector's regulator and grant giving body. CWA continues to grow (from 35 to 150+ members).

What was the initial aim?

To support community woodland groups to achieve their aspirations, to facilitate networking between them, to represent and promote community woodlands, and to ensure that the funding and regulatory environment takes account of community woodland needs.

What actually happened and what has been achieved?

People set up and became involved with CWA with slightly different aspirations or expectations. Some anticipated more radical change to e.g. FCS structures and the scale of community owned forestry, others were more focussed on creating more native woodlands (sometimes with unrealistic expectations). Since 2003 social forestry has become more mainstream, but traditional "commercial" forestry remains dominated by Sitka spruce.

CWA has found different ways to achieve its aims as time goes on. There has however always been some tension between helping CWA and helping members. CWA has always focused on delivering member benefits rather than growing itself.

Aspirations vary from member to member (determined by e.g. location/woodland type/community preferences). Community has tended to come before silviculture (woodland management is seen as a means to an end to deliver community development). CWA's role has been to help them whatever their aspirations (as long as this has been within the law/accepted forestry standards).

CWA regards the success of their members as a measure of success. An unquantified part of what members have achieved is down to CWA. In broader terms, there are now more members, managing a bigger area, and getting more things done. These have been major successes, but it is not all down to CWA. Need to be careful about claiming too much credit!

CWA has had an important role in establishing and evolving the NFLS, an important tool for community groups. This is one way in which CWA has helped FCS to be way ahead of other public agencies when it comes to asset transfer.

There has been a general mainstreaming of social forestry in FCS over last few years. For example the seedcorn / community fund is a specific funding which has been very useful. Again CWA has played a part in this.

Setting up Scottish Community Alliance was a big step forward for the community sector, and CWA was much involved. There is now more access for the sector especially to parliament (eg a greater voice in community empowerment and land reform bills).

CWA has helped to move the sector from being outsiders to being much closer to the centre, and we are now beginning to have structures that work in the way that the community sector wants them, a significant plus.

Evidence for these outcomes

- Membership numbers: 150 voting members (community groups) plus another ~25 who are represented by umbrella members (e.g. BFT), plus 100 associates and individuals (non-voting)
- Land in Management: just under 100,000 ha
Note 1: this is roughly 70% owned, 30% management agreement (with a small lease percentage in there as well too)
Note 2: at least 50% of area is non-woodland habitat, chiefly open hill landgood evidence on the activities of member groups such as NW Mull and Kilfinan, but it is more difficult to measure the increase in e.g. community empowerment.
- There is evidence of direct support and training provided, and of development of NFLS etc.
- Role of networking/sharing as contributing to members' success is difficult to capture, but the success of the members is evidence of CWA's success. CWA made it possible for people to do the things they do.
- Resource from government that goes into community woodlands each year. Level of investment (desirable metric, but not available!)

What factors contributed to those outcomes?

Personal factors: Time invested, bloody mindedness, enthusiasm, dedication and passion. Helped by holding the moral high ground and having good arguments.

Political landscape: Development of Scottish Parliament, and continuing devolution of powers.

Longevity of engagement: some CWA people have been committed for the long term, not just for passing job in a career. This commitment helps to generate trust.

Community Woods inspire: Encourages people to become involved.

How replicable is this experience; what is its potential as an element of a better approach to forestry?

CWA is an element of a better approach to forestry. Networking and peer support has focussed on multi objective forestry. This is a big plus: communities almost always deliver multiple objective forestry, whereas other ownership models occasionally deliver it.

Key messages

- Society gets more if it supports an effective intermediary. A membership owned intermediary acts as a facilitator and supporter, and is the best way to help groups over the inevitable difficulties of a growing sector.
- People get more if they work together in a network
- Community forestry has grown from being perceived as a cranky idea to something rather more mainstream, in part because groups have delivered: proof in delivery has worked.
- Anything which relies on people and passion has both strength and vulnerability, especially if it relies on a small number of people.
- The groups are different, and CWA does not take a cookie cutter approach, which allows people to express themselves, which is a strength. However it can make it difficult for outsiders, who expect standardization, to understand the sector.