

Woods for people – the new opportunity

A template for a new approach to forestry in Scotland

The time has come for a new, more balanced, vision for forestry in rural Scotland – giving greater emphasis to small, locally owned, diverse, multi-functional and productive woodlands, of proven benefit to communities, the rural economy and the environment. This is forestry with a belief in people, investing in their ability to create and manage a resource which meets local as well as national needs.

Scottish forestry already has high quality elements of such an approach; the issue is one of scale. The overwhelmingly dominant model of large conifer plantation (94% of the publicly owned forest estate) has its place as a source of raw material for big centralised industries. But, like bread in the diet, it should be part of a bigger and more balanced picture, delivering a much more diverse array of products and benefits.

Neighbour: "I share a boundary with 12,000ha of industrial conifer plantation, managed by a distant company. I don't know who owns it. This type of forestry may be 'efficient' in economic terms, but it's the quite different values of smaller locally-owned woods which offer so much more to the local community and its relationship with the land."

It is already established that Scotland needs an expansion of its woodland resource for a variety of reasons, including security of supplies and carbon sequestration. Communities in Scotland will be better served if, like renewable energy, much of this expansion comes from a de-centralised approach. This would support a much more varied pattern of ownership and yield a bigger dividend of social and environmental as well as economic benefits; it would also mean less 'timber miles'.

Adviser: "We provide woodland management advice to crofters and communities, tenants and lairds. Many have a real enthusiasm for native woodlands, finding that they can deliver the things that people want from woods- timber, firewood, and shelter for livestock, wildlife and game, the opportunity to get involved, and a fine backdrop to their daily lives. All they need is more support to get going."

The type of forestry which we propose would strengthen rural communities. Trees and woods should be a key feature of most holdings and landscapes, helping to address the fragility and insecurity of rural settlements, and the ecosystems on which they depend, especially in the uplands.

Scotland could learn a lot from other European countries whose rich, beautiful, productive forest resources are usually owned to a far greater extent by local people.

Forester: "I get phoned up on a regular basis by people wishing to find a parcel of woodland to own and manage themselves. I have to explain that, in contrast to most European countries, this is rarely possible in Scotland – virtually all woodland is tied up in big estates or owned by distant "investors" in large expensive chunks. In the future I would like a decent proportion of woodlands to be owned and managed by ordinary local people who derive some income from their woods, as in Scandinavia."

The appetite is here. Nearly 200 member groups of the Community Woodland Association provide living proof of the benefits of community involvement in forestry, as experienced for example in Sunart and Birse. We need thousands more.

Community Woodland Group: "We are responsible for managing a small Council owned urban woodland in one of Scotland's major cities. The group has over 200 local members. We wish to take ownership of this well used and much loved woodland which we've maintained in good shape for many years. But we can't because of financial and bureaucratic barriers imposed by cash strapped local authorities who tend to view these kinds of woodlands as capital assets for development. Can the new Scottish government help?"

The Scottish Crofting Federation puts the case for many more crofts, including woodland crofts, to meet local as well as national needs.

*Crofter: - "An important aspect of crofter forestry [in Assynt] has been the chance it has given several young people to acquire forestry skills". Quotation taken from Shared Experiences, Crofter Forestry in Assynt, in *Managing Small Woodlands**

On farms too, we must break through the artificial divide between agriculture and forestry, opening up the many benefits of growing trees to supply products for a local market, to create shelter and wildlife habitat, and to contribute to ecosystem and landscape quality.

Farmer: "The trees and woods on our farm are hugely valued by us for their shelter value for the livestock, for giving us firewood and for their contribution to making the place a pleasant place to live and work in – but it is a crying shame that in Scotland there are so many barriers at so many levels to prevent the wider integration of forestry and farming. Changing this must be an aim for all with an interest in the land and what it can give us."

All public investment in forestry should support the delivery of public goods. The subtle, finely tuned, people-centred, responsive approach of local forestry deserves mainstream support in the mix of publicly funded forestry.

Woodland project officer: "I have worked with local people in hill farming communities for the last fifteen years and been struck how receptive local farmers and communities are to getting the right woodlands in the right places. Farmers often want alternatives to diversify their businesses but they become defensive when they see Sitka factories swallowing whole farms. Rural communities are happy with woodlands which enhance the local scene but they object to the imposition of insensitive, investment-driven forestry by nameless landowners. Let's encourage a kind of forestry which fits in better with farming, creates opportunities for young people and enhances the environment."

Many more people would like to plant trees and manage woodlands but can't afford to buy the large swathes of land which are on offer. And many hundreds of thousands of hectares are potentially suitable for development as smaller but viable parcels of woodland to meet local needs, to enrich an impoverished pattern of land ownership and use, and to create local jobs.

Sawmiller: "We run a community sawmill. It makes a profit, employs 9 people and gives out thousands of pounds in local grants. But traditional economics says we are inefficient - our jobs:logs ratio is too high. We think we are more efficient: we create the most jobs per log and this area desperately needs jobs. I would love to see a proliferation of small sawmills, making the best use of local timber and meeting the needs of local communities."

Diversifying the ownership and management of forests to include a greater number of locally based people and communities would involve more sectors of society in forestry, bring more innovation to the industry, and provide different income streams and a more robust and socially just ownership pattern.

Owner: "I purchased an FCS disposal of just 30ha in the remote north-west and have made it the basis of a small business and home now to 4 people in 3 houses. We need more such opportunities."

How to grasp this new opportunity?

1 The **contribution to rural development**, including the wide variety of locally used products and services, should feature much more strongly in the way that the value of forestry is measured in policy terms. The national economy is important, but too much emphasis on tonnages of industrial timber means that precious opportunities for rural development are denied.

2 The complexities of the **Scotland Rural Development Programme** militate strongly against small scale applicants. The new scheme should be simplified, placing more emphasis on local priorities and diversity, and a more appropriate scale of forestry, from woodland creation through to diversified local processing.

3 **Land reform policies** should be revisited to ensure that they effectively facilitate ownership and management by communities and individuals.

4 The excellent but under-developed **National Forest Land Scheme** should be promoted strongly, widening the categories of locally-based interests which can participate, provided that they show evidence of their ability to deliver local public benefit and be financially sound.

5 **Disposals of the national forest estate** should be designed in such a way as to allow, indeed encourage, bids for parts of the land by local interests. There

is a need to sell land in smaller lots and/or to facilitate a syndicate approach. The syndicate could represent an adjacent geographical community or be a separate group of people who could be encouraged to develop links with that community.

6 In the emerging era of biomass energy, many more types of woodland are potentially 'productive', so there are fewer constraints on a far more ambitious approach to **species choice**. Grants should favour native broadleaves, especially timber-producing hardwoods and higher value softwoods, to gradually re-balance an overwhelming dominance of Sitka spruce.

7 **Restocking of harvested plantations** should be far more carefully planned to rebalance the species mix and ensure delivery of public benefits for the public funding involved. This is also crucial as insurance against emerging pest and diseases (where undue dominance of one species comprises an unacceptable risk).

8 The **management of wild deer** should be regulated on the basis of a stronger presumption in favour of woodland expansion.

9 The **planting of native woodlands** has too often ignored their productive potential, compared with their many other benefits to the landscape. There should be greater emphasis on native hardwood timber production as part of this mix.

[See 'Towards a Future Forest' – Scottish Forestry Vol. 64, 4 2010 pp 5-8. , also by the Forest Policy Group - for the full text visit <http://www.forestpolicygroup.org/>]

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