



Independent Panel on Forestry – A Personal and Collective view

Introduction

This response to the Panel's request for views is both a personal one and an aggregation of the views of members of North Gloucestershire Orienteering Club, of which I am currently chairman. North Gloucestershire Orienteering Club (NGOC) has 100+ active members and provides and participates in orienteering events in the Forest of Dean, the Cotswolds and south Herefordshire. The club has 22 principal orienteering areas (ie excluding town parks, schools and so on), of which 15 are wholly or mainly on Forestry Commission land, and most of the others are in woodlands owned either privately or by bodies such as the National Trust.

In the 2010-2011 orienteering season, recently ended, we put on about 30 events, resulting in perhaps 1800 visits to our areas, by more than 500 different individuals. The profile of our events, with small beginner events taking place in more urban settings, but the main programme on the principal areas, means that by far the greatest part of this activity has taken place on Forestry Commission areas.

On a personal level, I have lived on the edge of the Forest of Dean for 25 years, and now that I am retired I run or walk in the Forest of Dean typically 2-3 times a week. I have been orienteering since the mid 1970's. In my view orienteering is unique in the sports world, in that it provides both mental and physical challenge, either recreationally or competitively, as the participant chooses, for all age groups from childhood to old age. No other athletic sport provides competition, or recreational participation, for 5 year old and 80 year old simultaneously, on a weekly basis throughout the country.

What do forests and woodlands mean to us?

- They provide an escape from traffic and noise, for sports and exercise, as well as peace and quiet;
- They are wilderness areas for those of us who do not have mountains and moorland on our doorsteps; in a domesticated countryside woodland is the 'wildest' land we have;
- They provide a link to our past, when England was a wholly forested land; the UK's forests are an extremely scarce example of terrain which has survived human deforestation pressures over millennia to the present.
- They provide a haven and refuge for wildlife;
- in the Forest of Dean they define our lives, our localities, our character, and for many of us our livelihoods;
- They are a crucial part of the biodiversity of this country, and they are critical to our future well-being;
- Crown forests such as the Forest of Dean and the New Forest are as much a national treasure as is, say, the Palace of Westminster;
- They are a very scarce resource; the extent of forest cover (about 12%, I believe) in UK is less than one third of the EU average (37%), yet trees are a critical part of the natural environment.



A vision for the future of England's forests and woodlands

- There would be a range of policies designed to balance social, economic and political interests; there should not be a 'one size fits all' policy for all forests and woodlands; the ancient forests such as the Forest of Dean should not be treated the same as commercial softwood plantations designed primarily for economic benefit.
- There would be sound and permanent protection particularly for ancient woodland, but where appropriate also for geographically related woodlands (such as the Forest of Dean, for example, taking into account both the statutory and the sensibly agreed wider extents of the Forest).
- There would be strong and clear recognition of the non-monetary value of woodland;
- The current Public Forest Estate would be retained in public ownership, modified if necessary in accordance with the range of policies, and recognition of its economic, environmental and social value, and managed by a body similar to the Forestry Commission, providing consistent, prioritised and managed access to all users;
- sympathetic private ownership, typically for non-commercial reasons, as exemplified seemingly by organisations such as Woodlands.co.uk, would be encouraged; policies would be defined which protected small woodlands from development and thereby helped to reduce their 'commercial' value;
- The current tax regime for woodland ownership, regarded by some as highly tax efficient, would be retained to support and encourage the forestry economy, and forest ownership, but adapted and constrained in line with the range of policies designed to reflect the social, historical and environmental as well as purely economic value of forests and woodlands;

What are the benefits of forests and woodlands?

To me?

- They offer solitude, the closest I can get to wilderness, and the best place to see and study natural history;
- They are the only place locally where I can challenge myself physically and mentally through my orienteering activities; nowhere else can I escape from limited rights of way and get into the real countryside.

To Society?

- Because they are largely accessible to the public, they enable us as a sports club to organise orienteering events and activities which encourage people who might not otherwise do so, to go out into the countryside, to take exercise, and to challenge themselves. The woods are our indispensable sports ground, and we provide for the whole of society, not just the young and athletic.
- They provide space in an over-populated country for exercise, recreation, and contemplation.; they are the 'parks' of our highly industrialised agricultural environment.

To the natural environment?

- They are a critical part of it. They are the 'natural' state of the environment in this country;



- They support diverse wildlife that could not survive without them.
- They play a critical role in the control of greenhouse gases; they provide a carbon neutral environment which we need to emulate;
- They form a major part of the rich diversity of natural environments in this country which sustain the character, wildlife and unique qualities of the English countryside

To the Economy?

- They contribute enormously to the general well-being of the nation and its economy; one's 'feel-good' factor is immeasurably improved by a walk in the woods, or indeed just a view over the rolling and wooded English countryside;
- They are a natural resource which needs to be developed to improve our self-reliance on timber, though not at the expense of wider non-economic considerations;
- In the Forest of Dean they very significantly sustain the local economy, both in direct terms through employment and timber production, and indirectly as the main tourism focus for the area;
- With effective and sympathetic development they could contribute more to the economy;
- They are a vital component in the green economy, and a critical means of extending it.

Suggestions for practical solutions and good practice

- Clarify Section 16 of the CROW Act 2000, to ensure perpetual protection of rights of access for dedicated woodland; the Act seems ambiguous at the moment as to whether dedication is binding on future owners of S16 woodland, or is not;
- Review and update planning laws and regulations to recognise the special environmental and social value of woodland, and provide appropriate protection for it;
- Current FC policy on access and use of the forest for organised activities such as orienteering, as well as individual access such as provided by CROW 2000, should be retained, and enshrined in any legislation related to forest ownership; if FC can manage and operate with its current public access policies, then so could private owners;
- Work with local communities to develop more revenue earning activities in the public forests, such as recreational activities, small scale timber and firewood sales, and natural history and survival type education and courses. These would need to be balanced by the need to maintain the wilderness and solitude element of the forest that also give it its special character. Such a balance could only be achieved under a single management and ownership arrangement.
- Develop better community engagement in the management of the PFE. This could for example be by means of a local 'Board of Directors' or community forum, which the FC would involve as widely as possible in its management of the PFE. This would ensure strong and open communication between the 'owners' – the public – and the custodians of the PFE, and would give the former a stronger sense of involvement in the management of 'their' land. The current FC Forum in the Forest of Dean is a laudable attempt to achieve this engagement, but what is needed is a somewhat more executive engagement, by a smaller but more experienced body.



Priorities and challenges for policy

Priorities

- Permanent protection of the ancient forests and their environments;
- Recognition of the social and environmental value of forests and woodlands, so that the public 'cost' can be balanced by this value;
- Changes to the current tax environment, or at least to the woodlands and forests eligible for its application, to prevent exploitation purely for tax or other economic purposes, of those woodlands deemed to have other than purely economic value; recognition in policy that woodlands and forests are highly diverse in nature, and that a one size fits all policy is inadequate;
- Retention of a national body such as the Forestry Commission to implement policies and manage the public forest estate in a manner consistent with its social, natural and economic values; as an orienteering club we pay a fee to FC for collective access to FC woods, in return for managed and prioritised access. It would be impossible for us to achieve similar access at reasonable cost if we had to negotiate separately with many landowners. In one largely privately held wood near the Forest of Dean we have to deal with 5 landowners in an area no more than a few km square.
- Re-positioning the Forestry Commission, or a successor, as custodian and manager of the Public Forest Estate, and promoting its wider role and value to society, the economy and the environment, and doing this without huge conversion costs!

Challenges

- Balancing the books with social as well as economic value;
- Finding new ways to earn revenue from the Public Forest Estate;
- Getting universal recognition that woodlands and forests have more than economic value, and acceptance that this carries a public cost which is one worth paying;
- Getting local communities in forest areas such as the Forest of Dean to recognise that change has always happened, that the status quo is temporary, and that evolutionary change is necessary. An example is the proposed sale of forest 'waste' in the Forest of Dean. People are strongly against the idea of any sale, either because they see it as the thin end of a privatisation wedge, or because they are unwilling to accept any change. However there are probably good economic, environmental and management reasons why the detailed extent of the PFE should change and adapt, through sales and acquisitions, provided the overall strategy is clear and all interests are taken into account.
- Finding a way of getting closer public involvement in the management of the PFE.

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