

A RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON ENGLAND'S FORESTRY STRATEGY

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My interest in responding to this consultation is as an enthusiast for natural landscapes and, in particular, the enjoyment I receive from walking the remnants of ancient woodland on my doorstep in West Yorkshire, and throughout England.

Outside of a personal enjoyment, I recognise the importance of ancient and native woodland lies in the resilience it offers to our native species in the face of external threats from agriculture, pollution, and climate change, through acting as a reservoir which maintains these species and from which they can spread and be renewed into our landscapes. In addition, woodland edges often have high species diversity that can be supportive for non-woodland species.

Thus I welcomed the launch last year of Keepers of Time, the new policy for England's ancient and native woodland, and look forward to the realisation of many of the actions arising from that policy. I especially commend the following in that policy:

- ✍ taking action at a landscape scale
- ✍ implementing management 'with a light touch'
- ✍ re-establishing graded, more natural transitions and buffers between woodland perimeters and surrounding land use
- ✍ developing walking access between woodlands and other semi-natural habitats throughout whole landscapes
- ✍ developing networks of woodland and other semi-natural habitats into ecologically functional landscapes

Of the actions in the Action Plan for Keepers of Time, I would single out the following as being a remarkably exciting prospect:

- ✍ Pursue opportunities for the public forest estate to act as a core and catalyst for landscape scale projects

Wherein it relates to ancient woodland – and I would argue also for all new and existing woodland undergoing a transition to a more natural state - the new strategy for England's trees, woods and forests should draw heavily on the policy and action plan of Keepers of Time.

Often strategies for natural assets concentrate too much on the human extractive use of these natural resources, rather than giving an emphasis to the intrinsic value of the wild nature that they embody. It is to be welcomed that this consultation has a more inclusive view, and has provided supporting documents that address this. As I have no connection with the extractive use of woodland, my responses to the consultation questions will thus mostly be restricted to where they relate to the public realm in terms of public benefits, and to the ecological importance of trees, woods and forests to England's landscapes.

QUESTION 1

Do you agree with these principles and objectives of Government intervention in trees, woods and forests? If not, what principles and objectives should guide Government intervention?

I agree in so far as there will need to be a continuing discussion as to the relative attention given to each of the principles and objectives. For instance, we have an obligation under the EU habitats directive to re-introduce species lost due to human action so that we begin to "complete the community" of our post-glacial natural reserve. Amongst these could be beaver, wild boar, and perhaps the lynx now that it seems to have been lost due to human rather than natural causes.

At present, our predominantly cultural landscapes offer little real hope that re-introductions of such lost species would be acceptable or successful. There is a lack of sufficient type and scale of suitable habitat within which these mammals would be able to exhibit their normal behaviour, and without our need to manage or control them. A successful re-introduction of these lost species would be aided by a strategy for England's trees, woods and forests that set in motion the attainment of that suitable habitat.

QUESTION 2

Do any regulations present a barrier to the sustainable management of trees, woods and forests and associated businesses and activities? If so, what changes should be made?

Regulation

Under the current system of regulation for protecting nature, our efforts to maintain diversity rest on capturing ecological snapshots in small or isolated reserves (SSSI) surrounded by and often at risk from our predominantly cultural land, and from our tendency always to manage land to meet our expectations and choices for wild nature.

The outcome is a regulatory process that has become fixated with the compositional aspect of biodiversity, preserving components - whether individual species or vegetation types, or what can be ephemeral habitats - with scant recognition of the ecological functions of these components or how they associate in wider natural systems. Often the habitats have arisen through cultural influence, and are thus dependent on that for their continued existence, whether it is through reversion to some historic method of land use, or a management surrogacy that emulates it.

It comes hard to hear of regenerating woodland being cleared to satisfy the management requirements of an SSSI designation. Or because of a diversity action planning system that also targets individual species or ephemeral open space habitats, invoking management plans to optimise those species or habitats apparently at the expense independently of any other considerations (it has been called the "farming of wildlife"). Give people individual targets in action plans and they often lose sight of the bigger picture in the satisfaction of achieving those individual results. Fail to place their actions in the context of a wider nature, and they will persecute one form of nature for another, making their choice for what species will thrive rather than leaving it to nature's systems. Thus trees are often sacrificed for the benefit of everything else, such as heath, grassland and ground nesting birds.

Increasingly, a landscape-scale approach is recognized as being a more effective way in the long-term to maintain diversity in ecologically functional landscapes. It will require us to manage our expectations of wildlife so that we accept some re-ordering, and accept what can be the unpredictability of nature when faced with our millennia of intervention. An important component of this approach will also be the spatial and functional relationships between cultural land, and landscapes arising from this approach and that are given protection for their greater natural value. This offers a set of circumstances that we are not prepared for and which go beyond and make inadequate our current systems of conservation through small-scale designations or single species action plans.

QUESTION 4

Do these seven types of intervention adequately express Government's role in supporting trees, woods and forests?

vi) Purchasing public benefits

Greater thought should be given to taking a landscape scale approach to optimise the natural – and public – benefits that could arise from funding woodland schemes on private land through the Rural Development Regulation. Evidence from the collaborative approach taken by groups of farmers in some Countryside Stewardship Schemes supports this.

An approach for targeting funding schemes using GIS has been shown in recently published research – see Maximising the natural capital benefits of habitat creation: Spatially targeting native woodland using GIS, Bailey et al (2006) *Landscape and Urban Planning* 75 (2006) 227–243

vii) Direct action managing the public woodland estate by the Forestry Commission

It has been argued that role of the Forestry Commission is much altered from its foundation, having become of late a successful provider and steward of forest-type public parks for leisure and recreation while protecting and maintaining the public goods from the ecological services that arise from them, rather than solely acting as a buffer against product or market failure. Would it not be time to recognise this transition, and with it the aims and actions that this role implies?

QUESTION 5

Do you think we have got the balance right between the way national priorities will be expressed in the new Strategy and the scope for regional delivery to respond to local needs and opportunities?

The RFS for my home region of Yorkshire and Humber (Y&H) has captured the key issues that are capable of being addressed on a regional basis. They are recognisable from those that have arisen through discussion in many fora in the region over the last decade:

- ✍ improve knowledge and understanding about the value of trees and woodlands amongst the region's policy makers and decision takers;
- ✍ improve skills and business expertise within the forestry sector;
- ✍ increase woodland creation in the reclamation of derelict and underused land;
- ✍ protect and improve woodland Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Ancient Woodlands;
- ✍ increase accessible woodland near to where people live;
- ✍ increase the use of wood in sustainable construction and as a source of renewable energy;
- ✍ increase tree and woodland planting to help reduce flood risk.

And it would seem that things have moved on since the publication of the RFS as the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Biodiversity Forum have been mapping the potential for areas of new and linking woodland to create ecological networks within the region, something that the RFS does not specifically address, but calls for.

Wild nature, natural landscape, watersheds and washlands - all know no boundaries and thus while the process of drawing up an RFS will have been a immense local reinforcement for the value of woodland in the region, the national strategy must be an inspiration – and contain initiatives at a national scale – that give reason and encouragement for regions to plan and collaborate across boundaries. This is certainly a necessity in many other issues as it is for woodland in the trans-pennine area of the Southern Pennines.

QUESTION 6

Do you agree that creating new woodland solely for the purpose of carbon sequestration is not a national priority for forestry policy in England?

It does not make sense to design and create new woodland solely for the purpose of carbon sequestration when the natural and public benefit from natural regeneration of woodland or - as you note - the planting of mixed and multi-purpose new woodland offers so much more than that sole purpose. We will gladly accept though any collateral carbon sequestration from that woodland expansion.

QUESTION 11

Do you agree that it is a national priority to understand how we must adapt our woodland management to ensure that woodland can continue to deliver the full range of benefits in a sustainable way as the climate of England changes?

Emerging research indicates that the more natural a habitat is, the greater its resilience to change in the face of temperature increase compared to a cultural landscape. While this is encouraging in relation to ancient and semi-natural woodland habitats of some size, it may not be the case for plantation woodland, nor for such as street trees and other woodland plantings in ornamental and landscaping settings.

Climate change is a headline issue in nature conservation that is receiving attention perhaps in advance of our more urgent need to reformulate our protected land policy to accommodate a landscape scale approach to delivering integrity in ecologically functional landscapes.

The Y&H RFS and its action plan consider climate change. The Climate Change Group of the East of England Sustainable Development Round Table, together with the Forestry Commission, has published advice for woodland owners and managers that offers precautionary and preventative measures, and gives guidance that illustrates practical ways in

which trees and woods can reduce some of the negative effects of climate change.

Because of the variability of potential effect across the nation, it is perhaps at a regional level that the priority for addressing the effect of climate change lays, rather than at a national level.

QUESTION 12

Do you agree that it is a national priority to understand how we can use tree and woodland cover most effectively to manage water resources, protect soils and buffer against air pollution?

I agree wholeheartedly.

QUESTION 13

How and where could other Government policies contribute to delivering our biodiversity aims for trees and woodland?

Amongst the background information contained in the Review of Evidence for the Formulation of Forestry Policy in England, there is an excellent summation of recent publications and discussion about how existing semi-natural woodland given a new, lighter management regime (inherited natural) - and new woodland creation with a similar non-intervention (future natural) - could contribute wilder woodland landscapes where natural ecological processes regain greater importance (see Section 5.3.3 Minimum-intervention forests and new wild woods).

As noted in the review, large 'wildwood' landscapes are currently lacking in England. To be effective each wildwood would have to cover thousands of hectares to allow natural dynamic processes to dominate and to provide sufficient range for viable populations of large-territory wildlife species. This supports my response to Question 1 in regards to the re-introduction of lost species due to human causes under the EU habitats directive.

These new wildwoods are core forest areas, whose effectiveness can be further enhanced by linking together by wildlife corridors, or Forest Habitat Networks, so that forest-based species can move from one site to another. The aim of at least 30% tree cover in these corridors means that the landscape begins to function as if it were a single forest unit, but allowing these networks to be developed alongside other land uses.

I agree with the conclusion in the Review, and commend it to this consultation, that the scope for large-scale recreation of 'wildwood' landscapes that are dominated by natural processes should be investigated for their contribution to biodiversity, and the findings acted upon.

I am aware that there are plans for a national conference on the theme of future natural to take place in 2007.

QUESTION 14

How can Government best support its delivery partners in achieving these aims?

Government owns land in trust for the people of England through the estate managed by the Forestry Commission; the nature reserves managed by English Nature; the MOD estate; the estate managed by English heritage; and much else that I am probably unaware of. It thus has the potential amongst that land capacity against which to develop a policy of wildwood creation that could be different from many other rural policy areas as it would be independent of the need for the involvement and compliance of private land owners.

The latter is important for while many, including the Review, point to the potential of land released from farming use after introduction of the single payment, there is no certainty, and no certainty that private landowners would be interested to commit their land to such an initiative. Most importantly, there is a fundamental functional need in the evolution of these wildwoods for centuries of continuity afforded by an inalienability of the land given over to it. This argues for the use of public lands. While there is usually no great desire by Governments to enter into large scale land purchase, there may be a case for some purchases to supplement areas of the public estate so that they have sufficient size and a compactness of shape for future core forest areas, and for the buffering zones between them and the surrounding cultural landscape.

There is already a Government commitment to explore the use of the public forest estate to act as a core and catalyst for landscape scale projects in the action plan for the policy on England's ancient and native woodland (see earlier).

An analogy for this particular use of the public estate would be the public provision of art galleries, museums and urban parkland open spaces. An art gallery is a repository of excellence in the creative arts which the public can observe and admire but which remains intact and in place. A wildwood is a repository of the excellence of wild nature that we can observe and seek inspiration from, but from which we take nothing away except our enjoyment.

For functional integrity, it may not always be possible to give unlimited public access to all this new wildwood. The investment in their creation is still important as it is a gift to wild nature that we should be making in return for the ecological services such as clean water and air that it provides. As it explains in the Review, the biodiversity value of forests extends beyond immediate use value: some people are willing to pay to preserve wildlife and biodiversity that they will not see, but wish to ensure is available to future generations.

QUESTION 15

Do you agree that restoring open habitats by carefully targeted deforestation should be a national priority where this makes a significant contribution to the Government's biodiversity policies and to UK BAP targets?

I do not agree with this being a priority, as I explained briefly in my response to Question 2.

Many conservation projects are still being carried out independently of landscape considerations, such as all the trees being removed from heathland or grassland with no attempt to create a mosaic of natural vegetation.

I am struck by the fact that many rigorously prescribe the inclusion of open spaces in any expansion of native woodland, justifying them on the basis that the greater light levels add between 0-20% to the overall flora (depending on whether it is woodland edge or open space flora), but there is no consideration in reverse for woodland species within an open habitat.

As you imply in the consultation, it cannot be beyond the ingenuity of land managers to eschew this absolutist approach and only remove a proportion of the woodland over heath to leave a mosaic.

For open heathland managed by grazing, a proportion of the heath could be exclosed – say in a series of drifting islands taking up 30-40% of the area – and succession allowed until the point where the fences could be taken down and grazing resumed. Since the continuation of heathland always imposes a management burden, then a reinstatement of the woodland elements would be possible when they become senescent.

QUESTION 18

Do you agree that:

- ⌘ promoting public access to woodland should remain a national priority and
- ⌘ improving public access to woodland is a matter for regional and local decision makers to consider where there is unsatisfied demand?

I agree that promoting public access to woodland should be a national priority. I applaud the voluntary dedication last year of the public forest estate to open access under the CROW Act, and the Forestry Commission's Active Woods campaign, a national drive to promote the range of health and fitness opportunities offered by Britain's woodlands.

The regions have a key role in achieving more of this public access to woodlands. The Y&H RFS has a priority for action to increase accessible woodland near to where people live, based on the benefits from increased physical activity in a stimulating environment. The basis for action planning is the Woodland Access Standard developed by the Woodland Trust and which provides guidance on a desirable level of provision for accessible woodland.

QUESTION 19

How should existing mechanisms to deliver public access be modified or, if new mechanisms are needed, what might they be?

The Countryside Agency was provided with £1.2 million in funding last year to encourage

landowners to voluntarily dedicate land for public access. The three-year project will investigate landowner motivations and concerns, and secure a number of dedications of land by working with local authorities, landowners, and other local partners. Presumably, woodland access is amongst the targets of this project.

The Countryside Agency has also recently recommended the development of coastline open access to ministers. If voluntary dedication of woodland is under-represented during the three-year project, there may be a case for including some categories of woodland into open access regulations.

QUESTION 20

What could be done to improve social inclusion in woodland access and recreation?

Recent research from the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit demonstrates the beneficial relationship between local environmental issues and community engagement (Research Summary 11, Environmental Exclusion Review, Brook Lyndhurst, July 2004). Local environmental projects, and especially community woodlands of all sizes, provide a strong mechanism for residents to become involved in their community.

The spatial information maps for the Y&H RFS and the forthcoming report Countryside in and Around Towns – the Green infrastructure of Y&H, have both addressed social inclusion in woodland access and recreation through opportunity mapping. Achievements will follow as these reports are more widely read, and collaborations form - especially within Local Strategic Partnerships - for community and action planning.

QUESTION 21

Do you agree that provision of high quality facilities for public recreation in publicly and privately owned woodland is a national priority?

I agree.

QUESTIONS 22

Do you agree that it should be a national priority to promote the role of trees and woods within a network of green infrastructure in and around our towns and cities?

I agree. The Countryside in and Around Towns project of the Countryside Agency has funded a number of Green Infrastructure (GI) reports around England, and the impact of these is evidenced by the increasing incidence of local authorities and RDAs advertising officer posts for developing green infrastructure. As noted in the response to Question 20, opportunity mapping for woods and trees was part of the forthcoming GI report for Y&H.

QUESTION 23

Do existing policies, mechanisms and resources adequately support planting and management of trees and woodlands as part of a green infrastructure? If not, what changes are needed?

The District of Bradford in West Yorkshire has a thriving locally-based voluntary sector with a number of well-skilled organisations undertaking community environmental work – such as Bradford Community Environment Project, Bradford Environmental Education Services and Forest of Bradford. These organisations have been actively engaged individually and in partnership with themselves and with the local authority in developing urban and peri-urban green infrastructure, mostly through community based initiatives. The capacity is there within these organisations for greater delivery so that they can respond to action plans derived locally, and through increased funding, for more green infrastructure.

Bradford may be well-blessed, especially since these locally accountable organisations have to contend with a ubiquitous nationally-funded delivery organisation. There may be a case for identifying and supporting similar locally based organisations elsewhere in the delivery of new GI, especially in the burgeoning social enterprise and community interest sector.

QUESTION 24

How could woodlands within a new green infrastructure contribute more to other priorities, for example a growing network of non-motorised transport routes in and around towns and cities?

As part of the opportunity mapping for the forthcoming Countryside in and Around Towns

project for Y&H, riparian corridors with footpath access were identified in one local peri-urban area. In two of these, the watercourse is bounded by linear woodland belts in the manner of proposed Forest Habitat Networks, making them excellent exemplars for encouraging their identification and development elsewhere in the region as new GI.

The 30% tree cover of proposed Forest Habitat Networks is sufficient for them to have the functional characteristic of woodland, thus combining access to both water and woodland, but also creating a strategic mechanism for the conservation of woodland biodiversity when there is little scope for large area afforestation. The potential for these networks in reconnecting the many fragmented remnant woodland blocks, or new core forest areas, was given in the response to Question 13.

QUESTION 25

How can we develop the potential of trees and woods to deliver educational and other social benefits and help to create sustainable communities? What can we learn from our own experience or that in other countries?

The Green Heart project is the space between the three Dutch cities of Utrecht, Amsterdam and Rotterdam. These cities have a tradition of planning for networks of green spaces using land, river and canal corridors to link with the surrounding countryside. At national level, the Netherlands has a national spatial plan and the national ecological network.

QUESTION 26

Do local authorities have access to the expertise, resources and technical support they need to manage our urban tree stock?

Treescapes in urban areas have a mixed history of support from local authorities, and from shops and traders. Main shopping chains call for street trees to be removed from commercial centres so that customers are not soiled by droppings from perching birds. Local authorities have in the last decade used imaginative shrub and tree plantings in public squares, alongside urban roads and on carriageway medians, only to remove them when they are perceived to become traps for wind-blown litter.

The resilience of human life in urban landscapes, not least in its spiritual and psychological health, is nurtured in the spaces in between the clamorous activities that compete for our attention. The respite of a pocket park; or some soft landscaping with shrubs and trees, provide the visual stimuli that modifies our perception of location and, removed from hard edges, we can often filter out the noises that would drag us back to an urban reality. We should strive to embellish our urban locations with living things, working through the utilitarian difficulties, and knowing that a restoration of proximity to natural processes can fulfil an important human need.

QUESTION 27

Do current regulations and guidance on policy and practice offer adequate protection for scheduled and unscheduled archaeological sites and other historic or cultural heritage sites:

- i) in existing woodland; and/or
- ii) where woods are being planted or allowed to develop through natural colonisation

There seems to be a presumption that archaeological sites and other historic or cultural heritage sites have precedence in their preservation over wild nature. Must we celebrate only ourselves?

QUESTION 30

Do you agree that all government support for sustainable woodland planting and management should be based on delivering the environmental, social and other public benefits of sustainable forest management, including the production of renewable energy and the economic regeneration of lagging rural areas?

I agree.

QUESTION 31

Do you agree that:

- i) there should be no net loss in the total area of native woodland in England?
- ii) there should be a significant increase in the proportion of woodlands that are managed sustainably?
- iii) there should not be a national target for woodland expansion?

i) Maintaining total area of native woodland

I agree, but there should be something more positive than an 'expectation' that could be construed from the consultation there would be an increase in the total area of native woodland along with an overall woodland expansion, even if it is only due to the transformation of conifer plantations.

It has been suggested to me that it would be worthwhile not to completely remove all the conifers from plantations on semi-natural woodland, so that we may be able to see a small proportion of these conifers reach a naturally mature state within a regenerating native woodland. Considering the dispersal of sycamore and of larch through our landscapes that would seem to be impossible to eradicate now, I suppose there is no absolute case against leaving a few plantation conifers.

ii) Increase in woodlands managed sustainably

I agree, but sustainable management in private woodland should be a commercial imperative to the owner rather than having to be a compliance that is 'bought' by public subsidy.

iii) No national target for woodland expansion

We are not in a position to set a national target, nor necessarily give it any meaning.

A national target would need some basis on which it was derived, rather than is often the simple case, by a comparison to woodland coverage in continental Europe. Our instincts (and the 'expectation' in the consultation) are that our landscapes can accommodate greater woodland cover without impinging on the current, broadscale economic uses of our countryside. While it is speculated that there is a proportion of agricultural land that is no longer effective in our current level of food production, there are no figures that I know of that prove or disprove this.

QUESTION 32

If not, what should the targets be, should they be split down to regional level (or finer), and how would you justify them?

It must form part of our national policy process for woodland that we undertake research that combines spatial (land characteristic, climate, current and future capacity, and vegetation cover and use) with economic (market conditions, future subsidy regimes, food and forest product security, and the value of public goods from ecological services) conditions in a foresight program of opportunity mapping that looks at a range of outcomes for the future of our expanding woodland landscapes.

Through this process, with data modelling at local, regional and combining to national level, it must be possible to determine what could be a headline overall woodland coverage co-existing alongside an effective area of agricultural land that meets national objectives. Action planning could then be on a woodland coverage related to local and regional capacity for realistic woodland expansion to an optimum.

Mark Fisher 8 August 2006