

SCOTTISH FORESTRY FORUM

CLOSING REMARKS BY DAVID BILLS

Douglas Greig said he thought I had been here 10 years, in fact:

- its almost 7 years to the day – it might seem like 10 to you Douglas, to me it seems like yesterday;
- I have seen enormous changes in the political, economic and social environment which impacts the policy and practice of forests;
- it is not just a Scottish phenomenon, it is a UK phenomenon, indeed it is global;
- I have a position where I can see how these pressures have been responded to in England, Scotland and Wales.

I am able to contrast and compare UK experiences with other countries in Europe, and in International Fora such as FAO and the UN Forestry Forum. Let me tell you response to change in the UK has been swift and impressive. The industry may have had a reputation for being slow and inward-looking but this is no longer so.

I would like to comment on some of these influences and, where appropriate, outline the responses we in the forestry world have made.

The first is International Processes

The World Environment Conference 10 years ago in Rio was a watershed for forests; for the first time it was accepted that forests were not just a sovereign state matter (a matter for individual countries). It became clear that forest management practices adversely impacting climate habitat water flows and even air (smoke) were matters of global concern.

This has led to much more thinking about what sustainability means – beyond the tradition of biomass to habitat maintenance and of course recognition of the human dimension. Illegal logging and certification have become components of an international dialogue. Developed countries have found that the fundamentals applying to their modern approach to forest management have much in common with (and therefore they have much to learn from) overseas development experience.

Here in the UK we have applied ourselves to adopting the good practice recommended by the International Fora.

Hence we have the UK Forest Plan, an umbrella document founded on the detail of country strategies underpinned by UK criteria indicators with transparent monitoring. There is much more to do in detail but this fundamental framework has set British forestry on a firm footing and has been important in achieving broad and deep support for British forestry.

The second is the market. There has been a general over-supply of wood but a specific problem for us in the UK has been specifically related to currency. It has been painful and it has led to a more realistic view of what long-term forestry in the UK is about.

It cannot only be about timber. The subsidy required for intensive timber production cannot be justified. Timber from well-managed but lower cost countries is available – we cannot interfere with trade by tariffs or non-tariff trade barriers.

There is still a strong case for forestry because the UK, by any standard, is short of forests. Forests managed for their multi-functionality can represent an appropriate public investment either in the public-owned or the private sector.

The third influence has been our increasing understanding of how forestry is viewed by society; what their expectations and demands are.

In a post-modernist era the public no longer see forests (or farms) as places of production. They do not make the direct link between the forest they recreate in and the forest products they consume. The forest is a place for consumption whether they are running, walking, pedaling, driving or camping, this is what the forest is for them. This means they do not see timber production as an essential or even a necessary process. They are more interested in the impact timber production has on the quality of the non-timber products they consume than on the social and economic benefits of a domestic processing industry.

Fourth is local community involvement – communities can be defined at many scales or in terms of their interest, but what community involvement is essentially about is empowering people with access to knowledge and the forest itself. This enables them to have a meaningful say on forests and forest management which impact their lives. For the forest owner it has meant a new way of working and the need for new skills. For communities it has meant new interests and new opportunities.

The fifth is the political process of devolution. Devolution has in effect provided a much more supportive environment for what I call the 'new forestry'. Politicians in the devolved parliaments are more able to be involved in forest issues. They have a forum and funds where social, economic and environmental agenda can be debated and financed. They expect their constituents to be involved and they expect forest policies to be cross-cutting to support rural development, urban regeneration, health and other related policies.

Finally I want to make comment on what the five influences – international, market, social, community involvement and devolution have meant to forests in the UK. In particular, how has the profession and the institutions of forestry responded?

As I said earlier there has been a fundamental rethink of what sustainability means.

Foresters can be quite smug about sustainability, after all didn't they invent the concept – where annual cut did not exceed annual growth – where forest capital was nurtured and protected. But the concept is much more complicated than this. The

traditional concept of multi-benefit focussing very much on producing multiple benefits within the boundary of the forest has given way to a multi-function approach where we focus on sustaining processes within diverse ecosystems.

We now think, not only of Sustainable Forest Management in terms of on the site, but in terms of the impact it has on the greater landscape outwith the forest. And its not only thought of as a physical landscape affecting, for example, soil and water qualities, but as a biological landscape and of course a socio-economic landscape. What we do on our forest can affect water quality, wildlife and people not just in the forest, not only on the edge, but often well away.

This means individuals and organisations have had to come out of their boxes and look beyond the forest to make connections across a broad range of land use issues.

This has meant a huge change for organisations which have an interest in forestry.

None so more than the Forestry Commission which, while having to cope with the impact of poor markets on normal operations, has also had to take the lead in coming to grips with the new forestry. To face the challenge of communicating better within and without, of integrating our activities with other policies, of forming funding and activity based on partnerships at local, regional and national level, we have had to make changes. To cope with this we have restructured our workforce and will further re-define our role and way of working as we implement the Forestry Devolution Review.

To summarise:

The real future of forestry in this country is in its role as a sustainable system:

- rich in biodiversity;
- contributing to a functioning landscape;
- producing useful timber as an environmentally compatible source of construction material, of fibre, or a renewable energy source.
- In this future: Traditional skills are no less important. There is an important role in building a bridge between whichever traditional knowledge tells us is physically and biologically sustainable and what range of Sustainable Forest Management options is preferred by communities.
- In this future: The public will see forests and the benefits they offer for what they are and there will be the political commitment which will recognise public investment in forestry as a worthy investment because it yields a broad range of goods and services beyond timber fibre and renewable energy.

- In this future: The community will see investment in forestry as an investment in a sustainable functioning landscape of benefit to all – of benefit to all whether or not they ever visit a forest or woodland.
- In this future: Private ownership will make an important contribution and that contribution will be recognised by making it easier to “collect the rent”.

Today I have had a chance to reflect on the strategy (Scottish).

I have listened to the debate and talked to and heard a diverse range of interests.

I can understand why it is that those who once regarded forestry in the UK as inward-looking and a little old-fashioned are now envious of the way we have moved in Scotland, England and Wales to the head of the pack in coming to grips with the new forestry.

The Scottish Forestry Strategy is not the Forestry Commission’s – it is yours. I encourage you to continue with a forum of some kind – (I am open to how it works) – to make sure it is kept up-to-date and that the full potential of the Strategy is delivered.

David Bills