

TREES FOR LIFE

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Historically “the planting of” timber trees were used to supply the navy in house construction, to produce pit props for the mines, to employ the poor and to ornament the nation. Today there are different priorities for forestry, in particular the conservation, landscape and social benefits which need to be sustainable. Currently in the UK, conifer woodlands dominate Scotland and broadleaved trees are more prevalent in England. Now there is considerable debate on the nature of these plantings and whether continuous cover forestry provides a better option to clearfelling as a sustainable and environmentally sound approach to forest management.

Research to investigate this needs to consider the social dimensions, carbon sequestration and climate change, and the issue of balance of imports to home production of timber. In investigating the value of woodlands, especially those in public ownership, issues such as the value of biodiversity, recreation, health promotion, and tourism start to take a much greater role in the economic balance sheet than timber production alone. In order to investigate these issues, it is therefore increasingly important that a multi-disciplinary approach is taken to research.

Ornamenting the nation is still crucial but we need people not just to enjoy this, but to improve their health by exercising in our forests and countryside. Moreover the enterprise of planting of trees in the urban and peri-urban environment on brownfield land not only detoxifies and remediates land, but also provides real opportunities to bring the multiple benefits of woodlands to urban as well as rural communities. Within this context there is a massive need for innovation which can be driven from the natural science, social science and engineering perspectives.

In this context some of the fundamental research on the remediation of land using combinations of trees and microorganisms has generated a university spin-out company, Phytobials™ between the University of Surrey and Cornell University in the USA and this is likely to be developed through enterprise relationships with the public and private sector.

Other such examples of innovation will cover topics such as hydrogen generation from forestry products for fuel cells and the use of charcoal to remediate contaminated land.

This all needs to be considered within the new international and national priorities for integrated land management. It will involve the use of biometric approaches in the production of trees the monitoring of the contribution of forests globally to biogeochemical cycles and in the protection of their health. Such approaches will also generate more anticipation for future opportunities and less firefighting of problems should be necessary.