

Study of the long-term role of the Public Forest Estate: Landscape Discussion Paper

Purpose

1. To stimulate discussion by the study working group on the appreciation and handling of landscape issues within the Study of the Forestry Commission (FC) Public Forest Estate in England.

Context

2. Landscape is a core issue for FC England. At both large and local scale it is the first point of interaction between people and woodlands and is one of the most obvious impacts of forestry on society and the environment. It is also one of the principle reasons why large numbers of people visit woodlands for recreation and leisure.
3. By their nature, woodland creation and management involve both short and longer-term landscape change and this can be a matter of high professional and public interest. History illustrates the sensitivity of the Public Forest Estate (and the Forestry Commission) to public perceptions of the impact of larger-scale forestry on landscape character.
4. Equally, more recent experiences in places like Jeskyns and the New Forest highlight the potential concerns communities can have about potential changes in their local landscape.
5. We are entering a period in which a significant increase in woodland creation and management activity can be anticipated in the context of the UK Low Carbon Transition Plan, Woodfuel Strategy, Open Habitat Strategy and Green Infrastructure.

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6. At the same time, the strategic profile of landscape issues has been raised by:
 - Government ratification of the European Landscape Convention
 - Development of a new suite of landscape policies by Natural England
 - Publication of 'World Class Places' ~ Government's strategy for improving quality of place
 - A widening debate on the role and future management of land in England
7. In this context the Commission has responsibilities as:
 - A Government department ~ contributing to and delivering national policy
 - Custodian of England's Trees, Woods & Forests ~ promoting & regulating good practice
 - A public agency ~ requiring a robust 'licence to operate'
 - A major public landowner ~ demonstrating best practice
 - A business manager ~ offering a quality product and experience to potential customers
8. Landscapes evolve over long timescales. They tell the story of the changing relationship between people and place. They shape the identity of individuals and communities and create a sense of place and belonging. Through change and adaptation, history is a critical component of landscape character. These are important considerations in the future structure, direction and management of the Public Forest Estate.

European Landscape Convention

9. The European Landscape Convention (ELC) came into force in the UK on 1st March 2007. The ELC defines landscape as: '...an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors'. These include trees, woods & forests.
10. This definition applies to the whole territory of states (including urban and periurban landscapes, towns, villages and rural areas, the coast and inland areas) and includes ordinary and degraded landscapes as well as protected areas. This includes all land within the Public Forest Estate.
11. The ELC requires action at both national and international level - Annex 1 sets out both general and specific national obligations. Broadly these cover:
 - recognising landscapes in law;
 - systematic identification, characterisation and mapping of landscapes;
 - implementing policies for landscape protection, management and planning;

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- establishing procedures for stakeholder and community engagement;
 - integrating landscape into other policy frameworks e.g. spatial planning.
12. The ELC is not concerned directly with particular landscapes. Rather it is a framework to ensure landscape issues are adequately recognised, understood and responded to within the policies, strategies, plans, organisations and processes that shape land management.
 13. Government considers the UK to be compliant with ELC requirements but wishes to strengthen performance by incorporating its principles more explicitly in wider policies and strategies as they are prepared or revised. As a Government department and major public landowner, the Commission would expect to be an exemplar of good practice in applying the ELC, including through any refreshed mandate for the Public Forest Estate.
 14. Implementation of the ELC is led by Natural England on behalf of Defra. FC England has agreed to produce an ELC Action Plan during 2009/10. This will almost certainly contain proposals to strengthen understanding and consideration of landscape issues on the Public Forest Estate.

Landscape Character Assessment

15. Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) is a narrative and map-based tool for describing and understanding the character of existing landscapes in England. It identifies their main components (including trees, woods & forests), the relationships between them and how they come together to underpin local distinctiveness. It also highlights the major forces for change operating within the landscape.
16. While LCA is designed to provide an objective analysis of landscape, over time it has tended to develop a protective dimension, supporting the maintenance of existing landscape structures and resisting significant change, including larger-scale woodland creation in some areas.

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17. The strategic framework for addressing landscape issues around trees, woods & forests is the UK Forestry Standard and its associated Forests & Landscape Guidelines, both of which are currently under revision.

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18. The principle vehicle for considering landscape issues in the day to day management of the PFE is the Forest Design Plan and associated operational plans. Additional mechanisms apply to new woodland creation projects, particularly where there is a need for planning consent and associated public consultation.
19. Understanding and expression of landscapes within the Commission has moved on since most Forest Design Plans were first put in place. At that time, landscape considerations focused mainly on issues of 'design' and 'fit', both within the local landscape and internally. Landscape character was in its infancy and a fairly mechanistic approach was used to match forest design (and the reshaping of existing plantations) to local topography and biodiversity. More subtle nuances of landscape character, including the social dimension, received limited attention.
20. More recently, recreation, leisure and related social activities have become increasingly important aspects of the Public Forest Estate, fuelling increased development of visitor infrastructure. Current landscape activity is largely focused on servicing this growth through detailed design work in relation to:
 - concept development and funding bids for infrastructure projects on the PFE
 - public consultation work on major new PFE proposals
 - design and construction of recreation, play and visitor facilities on existing PFE sites
 - design & construction work on new sites
 - more strategic documentation and dissemination of good practice & guidance
21. Appreciation of landscape within the Commission is still mainly focused on 'visual aesthetics', including master planning and detailed design, and has yet to fully encompass more recent developments in landscape characterisation, planning and management.

Looking to the Future...

22. Consideration of the future role, shape and structure of the PFE needs to encompass:
 - the nature, location and design of our public forests and woodlands
 - their contribution to, or impact on, wider landscape character
 - their internal structure and design
 - fixtures, fittings & visitor facilities
 - the engagement of local communities in its planning, design and management

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23. Depending on the direction of the Study, it may not be necessary at this stage to undertake a comprehensive landscape assessment of the Public Forest Estate but this may change if the Study recommends significant structural change.
24. In meeting the requirements of the ELC, it would be appropriate for the Study to:
 - explicitly recognise the importance of landscape issues in any refreshed mandate for the PFE, including any proposed changes in structure, location or management
 - confirm that appropriate procedures, guidance and capacity will be put in place as part of any refreshed mandate to:
 - strengthen our understanding of the landscape character of the PFE
 - monitor landscape change on the PFE
 - recognise and address the potential landscape implications of future woodland management and creation proposals
 - ensure the organisation has access to appropriate skills and competencies to identify and address landscape issues on the PFE
 - ensure wide public involvement in debates on future landscape issues on the PFE

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Working Group response to the paper

The Working Group discussed the paper at their meeting on 29th September 2009. Following discussion the Working Group agreed that landscape was important and recognised the value of FC working with other organisations working on the implementation of the ELC and other landscape initiatives with respect to the Public Forest Estate. The Working Group report may touch on the Public Forest Estate's interaction with landscape. However, direct recommendations on changes to the Public Forest Estate resulting from these wider processes lay **outside the scope of the Study** and the Working Group's report.

ANNEX 1: EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION ~ OBLIGATIONS

The Contracting Parties undertake to implement four general measures:

- to recognise landscapes in law as an essential component of people's surroundings, an expression of the diversity of their shared cultural and natural heritage, and a foundation of their identity;
- to establish and implement landscape policies aimed at landscape protection, management and planning;
- to establish procedures for the participation of the general public, local and regional authorities, and other parties with an interest in the definition and implementation of landscape policies;
- to integrate landscape into its regional and town planning policies and in its cultural, environmental, agricultural, social and economic policies, as well as in any other policies with possible direct or indirect impact on landscape.

The Contracting Parties further undertake to implement, in a consecutive manner, five specific measures:

- awareness-raising: this involves increasing awareness among civil society, private organisations and public authorities of the value of landscapes, their role and changes to them;
- training and education: this involves promoting: training for specialists in landscape appraisal and operations; multidisciplinary training programmes in landscape policy, protection, management and planning, for professionals in the private and public sectors and for the relevant associations; school and university courses which, in the relevant subject areas, address the values attaching to landscapes and the issues raised by their protection, management and planning;
- identification and assessment: this involves mobilising the interested parties with a view to improving knowledge of the landscapes and guiding the landscape identification and assessment procedures through exchanges of experience and methodology, organised between the Parties at European level.

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- landscape quality objectives: this involves framing landscape quality objectives for the landscape identified and assessed, after public consultation
- implementation: this involves introducing instruments aimed at protecting, managing and/or planning the landscape.

[Further details and full text available

at: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=176&CM=7&DF=5/8/2007&CL=ENG>]