



Leisure landscapes: understanding the role of forests and woodlands in the tourism sector

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Background

While the use of forests and woodlands for tourism is not new, their utilisation for leisure purposes is receiving new impetus. This is strongly driven by the growing demand from a diverse range of groups within society for opportunities to take part in leisure activities. The increasing interest in tourism is also a response to the recognition among policymakers of the ability of tourism and broader leisure activities to address a range of economic and social dilemmas facing contemporary society, for example the diversification of rural economies, social exclusion and obesity. There is also a mounting awareness that it can work to support, and even act as, a key driver, for the protection and enhancement of the environment. As a result tourism has moved from being a peripheral aspect to a central focus of sustainable forest management.

Figure 1

Tourism is seen as being central to sustainable forest management due to the economic, social and environmental benefits it can deliver.



With the newly emerging emphasis on tourism comes a need for forest managers to explicitly focus more on leisure uses within decision making and a related demand to develop knowledge and understanding of issues relating to these uses. Indeed, as the impacts and lessons learned from the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in spring of 2001 began to be assessed, it became clear that values of forests and woodlands for tourism were far greater and diverse than had been previously recognised (Figure 1). However, it also led to a realisation of the lack of knowledge of both the current and potential role of forestry in the tourism sector and the need for research to understand how those relationships might be developed to their full potential.

While some research had sought to understand how tourists use forests and woodlands (for example Forest Enterprise agencies' visitor monitoring programmes), there had been little, if any, research which had attempted to work directly with tourism providers to understand (a)

how they value and use forests and woodlands and (b) how the relationship between the forestry and tourism sectors might be developed to deliver benefits more effectively. The Leisure Landscapes research project was developed to address such questions.

The project worked with tourism providers in three case study areas in England (Suffolk Coasts and Heaths), Scotland (The Great Glen) and Wales (Dyfi Valley) during 2003 (Figure 2). Each study area was selected in order to obtain a diversity of situations in terms of natural environment, including forest and woodland type, socio-economic structure of local communities and the stage of development of the tourism sector and its relationship to forestry. The project sought to understand how tourism providers perceive and use forests and woodlands and to explore the issues they saw as being important to enabling the forestry sector to support and benefit from the work of the tourism sector. Tourism providers were split into two key groups.



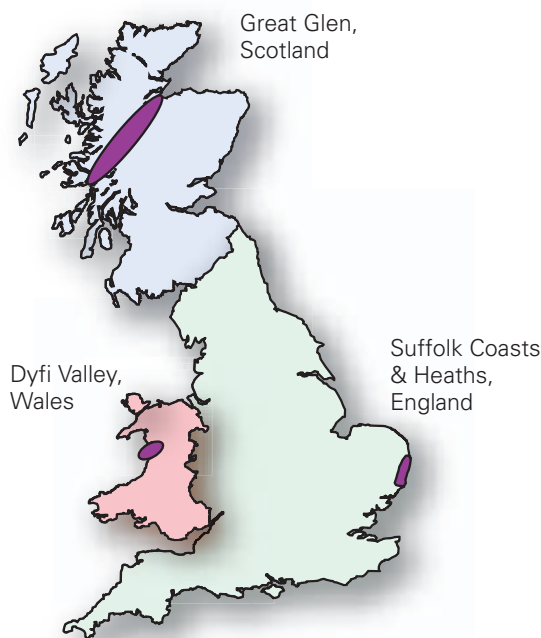
Strategic organisations: generally those with a policy remit, currently linked or which might link with tourism, and selected to represent a broad range of sectors such as those relating to environmental protection, economic development, health and education.

Tourism enterprises: mainly businesses but also organisations, particularly in the arts sector, falling into three broad categories:
 (a) accommodation providers, pubs and shops,
 (b) activity providers, (c) arts providers and tourist attractions.

This article reports on some of the key findings from interviews with the strategic organisations and focus groups with tourism enterprises, and discusses their possible implications for forest and woodland management.

Figure 2

Map of study areas.



Values and uses of forests and woodlands for tourism

Strategic organisations saw forests and woodlands as having a number of key qualities which make them suitable and sometimes favoured spaces for tourism activities. These were identified as:

- Visual screening abilities
- Noise absorption abilities
- Extensiveness (especially in the case of publicly owned forests)
- Physical robustness (especially in the case of coniferous plantations)
- Ability for year-round use
- Ability for all-weather use.

Consequently it was argued that forests and woodlands are well suited to accommodate tourism uses, as they can:

- Absorb relatively large numbers of people
- Accommodate a wide diversity of uses
- Accommodate physically destructive, noisy and/or visually intrusive uses (particularly coniferous woodlands)
- Promote year-round tourism
- Attract visitors regardless of the weather.

Interviewees suggested that opportunities exist to utilise these values so that, where appropriate, forests and woodlands are more explicitly used as tools for tourism management in the wider areas in which they are located. For example, to enable tourism destinations to absorb visitors and a wide range of uses in more socially and environmentally acceptable ways than they would otherwise. Given the relatively 'robust' nature of coniferous plantations and their consequent ability to accommodate physically destructive, noisy and visually intrusive uses (Figure 3), there is a strong case to argue for further modification and promotion of these areas for outdoor recreation and tourism.

In contrast to strategic organisations, tourism enterprises identified forests and woodlands as being valuable in terms of:

- Motivating people to take visits
- Extending the length of time people stay in local tourism areas
- Extending the length of the tourist season.

For example, an activity business described how they ran guided horse-riding tours and the way in which the woodlands in the area enabled them to take visitors somewhere peaceful, attractive and where they could see wildlife, where they could feel they had 'got away from it all'. They described how the alternative to using woodlands was to ride through agricultural fields and on roads. This however was not seen to offer the quality of experience sought by visitors. As such forests and woodlands were critical in enabling the company to motivate people to visit their business.

An accommodation provider in the Great Glen also spoke about value of woodlands for tourism but this time in relation to their role in extending the length of stay of visitors to his business:

...we tell them about which woodland they can walk in and suddenly they decide they are not going to stay one night, they are going to stay two or three nights and from my point of view it's essential to have a good woodland around, because the business is quality effective by the fact that we do have it.

Accommodation business, Great Glen

Another business spoke of the way in which forests and woodlands extend the tourist season:

There is a lot of photography that goes on and I think with all the different colours, just ordinary touring people who would never get out of the car, sort of older people, you know, they are all taken on the colours and I think that it is selling an extended season as far as we are concerned.

Accommodation business, Great Glen

Figure 3

Forests and woodlands were valued due to their potential ability to raise the social and environmental acceptability of tourism by absorbing a wide diversity of people and uses, including physically destructive uses.



These values were seen to be related to three key three features of forests and woodlands – their imagery, the access they provide to the 'natural' environment and their man-made facilities and services. These are discussed in more detail below.



Imagery

Forests and woodlands were seen to have an important role in determining the identity of local tourism destinations (Figure 4). It was felt they provided the image of a 'green' and 'rural' tourism destination. In the Dyfi Valley it was the sheer extent of forestry which was seen to promote 'green' imagery:

Some people have never seen that expanse of green and trees and it is useful for that benefit, and certainly the views straight out of my accommodation, I get people just stood hour after hour...just looking at it, it could be much better, but it is certainly better than without them.

Accommodation provider, Dyfi Valley

In the Great Glen it was the way in which the forests contrasted with the mountains, lochs and waterways which was seen as important in creating the area's tourism identity. In the Suffolk Coasts and Heaths it was the contrast and blending of woodland with lowland coastal heath which was seen as critical in creating an image which attracted visitors to the area. The changing colour of woodlands and their strong association with spring and autumn, were seen to extend the length of the tourist season by attracting visitors at times of the year traditionally regarded as 'shoulder' seasons in the tourism industry.

Access to the natural environment

Forests and woodlands were also felt to provide access to the 'natural' environment in which the biological materials (for example plants and animals), sights, sounds, smells and over all aesthetics and ambience could be used by tourism enterprises to stimulate a range of beneficial experiences for their visitors (Figure 5):

You wouldn't believe the number of visitors who say, the best thing about this place is the smell, the older generation, 'this reminds me of my childhood', which for them was great, the smell, the whole building has that wood smell through it.

Accommodation provider, Dyfi Valley

It was highlighted that the forest and woodland environment contrasted with the everyday settings of many people, particularly urban dwellers, and that these experiences might not otherwise be available to them. The ability to explore away from trails into the 'wild' resource and the related sense of excitement and adventure were seen as being important, especially for activity providers.

Facilities and services

It was also discussed that forests and woodlands contain a range of man-made tourism facilities such as trails, visitor centres, interpretation boards, car parks and toilets which can be used by tourism businesses and their visitors.

Services such as guided walks and activities were available in the Great Glen and Suffolk Coasts and Heaths, and these too were also felt to be part of the product sold by tourism enterprises to visitors (although they appeared to be currently under-utilised). It was felt that high standards of facility and service provision were critical if tourism areas were to maintain or develop a reputation for quality but that this was partly related to the condition of the natural environment in which they were located. Developing and maintaining the appropriate balance between 'natural heritage infrastructure' (Scottish Natural Heritage, 2001), for example plants and wildlife, and man-made infrastructure, for example trails and car parks, for different tourists and tourism areas was seen as being critical.

Uses of forests and woodlands by tourism providers

Having developed an understanding of the values associated with forests and woodlands by tourism enterprises, it was important to explore and understand how they utilise those values. As discussions developed, it became clear that tourism enterprises use forests and woodlands in a diverse range of ways but that these uses fall into two broad categories:

Figure 4

Forests and woodlands can be an important part of an area's tourism identity.



Figure 5

The access provided by forests and woodlands to the natural environment enables tourism enterprises to provide a range of beneficial experiences to visitors.



- **Direct uses:** which take place in forests and woodlands.
- **Indirect uses:** which utilise forest and woodland characteristics, biological materials and infrastructure, but do not take place within forests and woodlands.

These uses are explained in more detail in Table 1.

As enterprises explained their uses, it became evident that it is not possible to make assumptions about the nature of use according to the core activity of an enterprise (for example, accommodation provision or activity provision). The increasing competitiveness of the global tourism industry has created the need for high quality and distinctive tourism products which are more complex and grounded in local and regional contexts to a greater extent than they have been in the past. One approach from enterprises has been to add quality and value to their core service through diversification and an emphasis on local and regional experience, so, for example, accommodation providers may also offer guided tours and activities, evening meals as well as use and sell local products.



As such the use of forests and woodlands by tourism businesses reflects the wider tourism services and activities which constitute their overall product. This is illustrated in the following extract from a discussion with an accommodation provider in the Great Glen, Scotland:

We were talking about the berries, we utilise the sloes for sloe gin and brambles and that sort of thing. Again we kind of use these and tell people about them and they buy into it, the kind of being out in the nature.

Accommodation business, Great Glen

Given this situation it is more accurate to refer to direct and indirect uses rather than direct and indirect users, as it is generally the nature of the activity rather than the provider which determines the way in which tourism providers

utilise forests and woodlands. This has important implications for the way in which forest managers consider and deal with the needs and concerns of tourism enterprises, stressing the need to be flexible and open-minded with regard to accommodating the needs of different businesses.

Relationship between the Forestry Commission and the tourism sector

Both strategic organisations and tourism enterprises discussed the need for the development of a stronger relationship between forests, woodlands and tourism, and in particular, partnership working, to share a broader range of resources than at present (Figure 6).

Table 1

Indirect and direct tourism uses of forests and woodlands.

Indirect uses Images, text and verbal references to:	Direct uses Physical uses of:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Forests and woodlands (imagery) in marketing literature, e.g. websites, leaflets, brochures, guide books, CD roms, and in conversations with guests and potential visitors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 'Natural' space and biological materials and their related ambience and acoustics for activities, e.g. forest theatre and adventure activities, which do not specifically focus on the use of built facilities such as trails and visitor centres.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Facilities and services, e.g. trails, visitor centres, car parks and guided walk services, in forests and woodlands. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Man-made facilities such as trails, interpretation, visitor centres, toilets and car parks for activities, e.g. guided walking and horse riding tours.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Biological products (plants and animals) found in forests and woodlands. Also physical use of biological materials gathered in forests and woodlands by others to provide products for visitors, e.g. food and drink, furniture and textiles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Biological materials (viewing and gathering) to make products such as food and drink, arts and crafts, or as a means of providing enjoyment education and learning.

Figure 6 (a) - (d)

Partnership working to integrate different aspects of forest and woodland tourism will be important to its success in delivering sustainable development. (a) Furniture made from British hardwoods. (b) Blackthorn berries (used to make sloe gin). (c) Cafe at Coed Y Brenin Forest. (d) Visitors enjoying a forest walk.



Strategic organisations stressed the importance of the Forestry Commission and forestry sector understanding more fully the resources it has available for tourism and utilising those wide ranging resources to their full potential. They identified the ‘tourism resources’ shown in Box 1 which they felt the Forestry Commission possessed.

In particular it was felt that there was a tendency to focus on the physical land and infrastructure resource of the Commission, and that a wider range of resources could be more actively utilised to add value to current tourism work. Knowledge and skills for tourism land management were felt to be particularly underappreciated and underutilised.



Box 1

Forestry Commission 'tourism resources'.

- Trees
- Land
- Other natural and biological materials
- Man-made infrastructure and information materials
- Services such as guided walks
- Expertise (knowledge and skills) to manage for leisure uses
- Funding/access to funding
- Human resources

Partnership working was seen to be important in terms of:

- The planning, delivery and maintenance of tourism products and services
- The marketing and provision of information to tourism providers and visitors
- The transfer knowledge and skills for tourism land management.

For example, it was suggested that with greater involvement of tourism enterprises in forest planning it might be possible to better link facilities and services in forests and woodlands with those of surrounding tourism providers. For example, trails could be planned so that they linked to local attractions, shops, pubs and accommodation. This approach was seen not only to support local economies but also to potentially provide visitors with a higher quality of experience. Similarly, in relation to marketing and information provision, it was suggested that, given the positive imagery associated with woodlands, there was potential to link many small and diverse forest and woodland tourism providers (e.g. landowners and managers, activity providers and crafts people) and projects into a more integrated and thus powerful 'woodland tourism' concept (Figure 6).

For example, a craftsman in one of the study areas discussed the potential value in being able

to connect the wooden furniture he made to places where people could find out more about the management of woodlands and where they could go to experience that environment.

At the same time, the potential in working with enterprises to market and deliver information on Forestry Commission tourism products and services was also highlighted. As a shop owner in the Suffolk Coasts and Heaths commented: 'we talk to customers, we act as a tourist information service, we tell them places to go'. Indeed, some enterprises were already promoting forest and woodlands through word of mouth, leaflets and websites. It can be seen therefore that through partnership working, it was felt that much could be done to add value to the tourism sector by increasing the diversity (breadth), meaningfulness (depth) and accessibility of tourism products and services.

It was clear, however, that the precise nature of involvement needs careful consideration of the local contexts within which development is being considered. For example, issues of competition and commercialism were key concerns in some areas. Where this was the case, there was strong support for the Forestry Commission to fill gaps in the market left by the private sector and to provide non-market goods and services.

A number of barriers to joint working between the Forestry Commission and the tourism sector were identified by tourism enterprises; these are shown in Box 2.

These barriers suggest there is a need for forest management to more explicitly consider the needs of tourism providers, particularly enterprises, and ways in which the availability and accountability of resources and processes surrounding forest and woodland management, including those relating to information provision, might be increased. At the same time it is critical that forest and woodland owners and managers also consider their own marketing and

Box 2

Perceived barriers to joint working between the Forestry Commission and tourism enterprises.

A lack of:

- Understanding that Forestry Commission is a tourism provider
- Understanding that forests and woodlands are tourism products
- Knowledge of products and services offered by the Commission, including tourism sites and facilities, leaflets and the website and lack of processes to gain information on those opportunities
- Information on forest planning and management and opportunities to get involved in those activities
- Resources available within the Commission to provide recreation facilities and to support and train enterprises in the provision of recreation infrastructure
- Reliability in the availability and quality of the infrastructure e.g. if forest trails are closed for timber felling or if infrastructure is left to deteriorate after an initial period of capital funding

information requirements in relation to tourism providers; for example in order to market their recreation resources as tourism products what information do they need from local accommodation providers and activity providers?

Conclusions

This research has highlighted the considerable value and wide-ranging resources that tourism providers feel the forestry sector has for tourism as well as the vast potential that they feel exists for the further development of forests and woodlands as tourism resources.

In particular, it proposed that given the relatively 'robust' nature of coniferous plantations and their consequent ability to accommodate physically destructive, noisy and visually intrusive uses, there is a strong case to argue

for further modification and promotion of these areas for tourism. More broadly it was proposed that forests and woodlands, where appropriate, could be used to increase the social and environmental acceptability of tourism activities. These management potentials might be especially pertinent with the passing of new access legislation in Scotland, England and Wales where there may be a need to accommodate increased leisure use of open space land and to more actively manage the way in which people use that land.

The work also revealed that tourism providers have a diverse and complex range of relationships with forests and woodlands, which as well as them taking part in and promoting activities which might typically be associated with woodland recreation, such as walking, cycling and horse-riding, also involves them using and promoting natural and locally sourced materials and products as well as man-made infrastructure.

The potential for the development of a closer working relationship between the forestry and tourism sectors was identified and explored. The potential for greater partnership working is especially significant given that tourism and recreation management is split amongst a wide range of strategic players, for example those involved with sports development, environmental protection, tourism promotion and land management.

It was stressed that in order for joint working to be developed more effectively, there is a need for the Forestry Commission and forestry sector to more fully understand the resources available for tourism and the ways in which these might support the work of the tourism sector and, in particular, how they can be made more accessible to tourism providers.



As well as focusing on the delivery of new products and services, the work highlighted the importance of forestry providing added value to the tourism sector, for example by strengthening the connections between forest and woodland tourism products and the wider tourism sector, including other landowners and managers.

In particular, the work suggested that in order to get the full potential out of its wide-ranging resources available for tourism, the Forestry Commission needs to consider more proactive and effective communication with tourism providers to deliver strong and focused messages about its role in tourism and information on its related products and services as well as day-to-day forest management. It has also highlighted a need to develop more open and transparent approaches to forest planning.

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