

Involving communities in the governance of Scotland's state forests

Simon Hodge, Forestry Commission Scotland Social Policy Advisor (Silvan House, 231 Corstorphine Road, Edinburgh, UK, EH12 7AT) & Cameron Maxwell, Forestry Commission Scotland Community Policy Advisor.*

Abstract

43 % of Scotland's 1.3M ha of woodland is state owned and managed by the Forestry Commission. From a forest cover of just 5 % at the beginning of the last century, forest cover in Scotland has grown to 17%, in large part due to the establishment of large-scale timber producing plantation forests. In the last 25 years the potential to increase the delivery of social, environmental and rural development benefits from Scotland's state forests has been increasingly recognised, but it is only in the last 5-10 years that the value of involving communities in forest governance has been formally recognised. This paper describes the evolution of forest governance in Scotland and shares lessons learned. This is paralleled with wider developments in political devolution and land reform. The forestry sector in Scotland is at the forefront of community engagement in land use. There are now well-established community engagement processes at local level as well as national-level stakeholder input through the Forestry for People Advisory Panel. Since 2000 the Forestry Commission in Scotland has published a formal commitment to work with local communities, has entered into over 80 partnerships with community groups for the management of local state forests and has instituted a major organisational culture change programme to increase responsiveness to community stakeholders. In 2003 land reform legislation was enacted in Scotland giving communities a right to apply to buy land placed on the open market. As a further step in land reform, the National Forest Land Scheme is currently under consultation, which will allow communities to apply to buy any state forest land. Another element of the scheme will increase the supply of state forest land for affordable housing, where this is consistent with the principles of sustainable development.

Introduction

This paper describes an evolution of governance of state forests in Scotland, and focuses in particular on the relationship between state forests and local communities. It shows how approaches to forest governance in Scotland have reflected wider changes in governance, sometimes lagging behind and sometimes helping to break new ground.

Richards (in House of Commons 2001) recognises three paradigms of governance that have operated in Britain over the last 60 years:

1. The post-war era where governance was characterised by citizen deference, the rise of the paternalistic welfare state and a highly protected economy.
2. The 1970s and 1980s period with its focus on the citizen as consumer, with a centralising emphasis on increased economy of government and efficiency of public spending.
3. The period from the 1990s to present with increasing emphasis on citizen engagement and the citizen as 'customer', with a decentralising of governance and a focus on achieving effective outcomes from public policy and service.

These patterns of governance have been reflected in the management of Scotland's state forests with:

- the pre and post war emphasis on state provision of social and rural development benefits of forestry; through
- an era of rationalisation and moves towards privatisation of state forests, along with increased demand for recreation and public access; to
- the current era with an increasing focus in the management of state forests on local governance and community empowerment.

This evolution of forest governance in Scotland has been closely linked to the associated drivers of:

- international sustainable forest management processes;
- political devolution; and
- the national land reform agenda.

Scotland's forest resource

Scotland has, for historical reasons, significantly less forest and woodland than many other countries despite relatively good growing conditions. Native woodlands of semi-natural origin cover 2% of land area, with planted forests and woodlands covering a further 15%. Almost four fifths of the total forest area in Scotland consists of conifer species primarily planted for timber production. 58% of this conifer resource is made up of the main non-native commercial species, Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*), with Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) the only native commercial conifer species, occupying 29%.

Forestry Commission Scotland manages 667 000 hectares of forest land. 55 000 hectares of national forest land are covered by some type of informal or formal agreement between Forestry Commission Scotland and local communities. The forest area in private ownership includes land owned by local communities and Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations, although the area of forest land owned by communities is currently insignificant in national terms.

The social roots of state forestry in Scotland

The social role of forestry in rural areas has always been one of the main considerations in national Forestry Policy in Britain. This traditional commitment stretches back over

the 75 years during which there has been a national forestry policy. Indeed, the potential of forestry to provide rural employment and stem depopulation was one of the reasons for the establishment of the Forestry Commission in 1919.

However, the post-war imperative to create a strategic reserve of timber was the central pillar of Forestry Policy until 1958 when the emphasis moved to the economic and social objectives of producing timber for home based industries and providing employment in rural areas where jobs were scarce. In the 1960s, landscape considerations and the provision of recreational opportunities were added.

In the earlier years of the period from prior to the 1970s, a number of specific measures were seen as contributing to the social role of forestry in rural areas. These included the establishment of Forest Workers Holdings and the creation of Forestry Villages. However, these measures had lost their relevance by the 1970s. The requirement for Workers Holdings and Forestry Villages had been overtaken by factors such as the use of a more mobile work force and the drive for increased efficiency. The private sector had also become responsible for most afforestation and increasing mechanisation had started to reduce existing forestry employment significantly.

The reform of Forestry Policy at the end of the 1980s changed this context, with the replacement of timber production as the over-riding objective by multi-purpose forestry aimed at integrating economic, social and environmental benefits (Forestry Commission 1991). Thus by the 1990s, it had become possible for the first time within Forestry Policy to consider the potential of forestry in rural areas to contribute specifically to the needs of rural communities.

The emergence of the forest governance agenda

Whilst the seeds were sown much earlier, the FAPIRA (Forests and People in Rural Areas) Initiative brought local forest governance in Scotland to the fore. FAPIRA was an informal partnership established in 1994 between the Forestry Commission, Rural Forum Scotland, development and countryside agencies and the WWF. Its purpose was to: 'promote the social value of woodlands and ways of delivering the greatest social benefit from woods and forests in rural areas for local people'.

A subsequent report (Callander 1995) laid out a case for 'rural development forestry' in Scotland with a key argument being that local communities should have access to the management of local forest resources, including rights to the benefits of management.

The report provided a vision where:

'forestry in these communities provides one whole dimension to the web of social networks based on agriculture, recreation, hunting and other local activities and institutions. These interlocking networks underpin social cohesion and help support diversity and flexibility in employment and income options. Forestry is not something done just by foresters. The community is engaged in targeting and securing benefits for themselves.'

It recognised that:

'one essential dimension to promoting the contribution of forestry to rural development is for people living in rural areas to be more fully involved at all levels of participation in forestry – from different levels of consultation and representation through to the more direct and beneficial participation of owning or controlling forests and forest lands'.

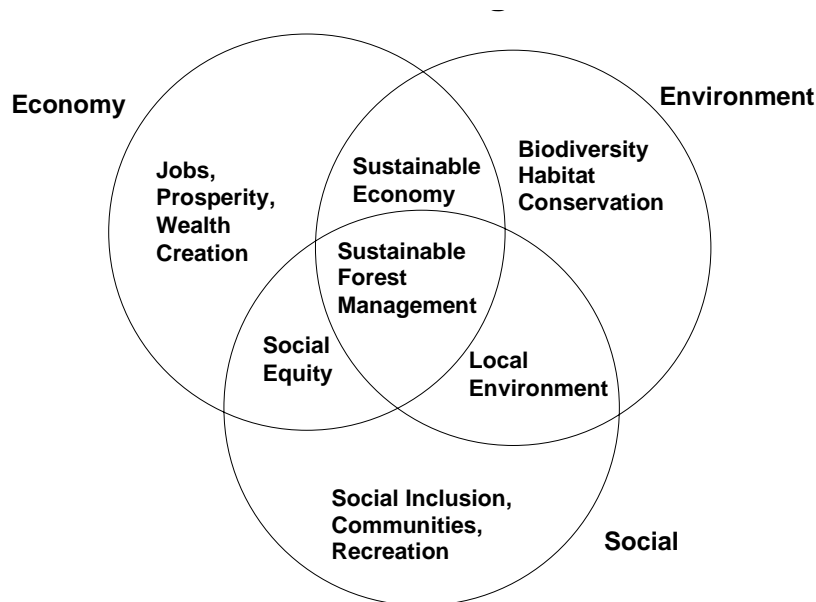
Realising this vision would require a further shifts in forest policy, delivery mechanisms and organisational culture. This process gathered pace through the late 1990s, underpinned by international processes on sustainable forest management, political devolution within the UK and the emerging land reform agenda in Scotland.

The contribution of international Sustainable Forest Management processes

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro provided the impetus to bring together a coherent framework for sustainable forest management based on the principles of:

- Social progress which recognises the needs of everyone.
- Effective protection of the environment.
- Prudent use of natural resources
- Maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment.

Model for sustainable forest management



These principles were articulated at a European level at the Helsinki Ministerial Conference in June 1993 where European governments built on the Rio Forest Principles by adopting a set of guidelines for the sustainable management of European forests. The Helsinki Guidelines recognised the need to provide ‘optimal combinations of goods and services to nations and to local populations’ within the context of sustainable forest management. It is an indication of the political priorities of the day that local governance of forest resources was not specifically identified as an issue at this time, at least in relation to European forests. However, the evolution of Forestry Policy from the dominant objective of timber production to the more holistic aim of sustainable forestry arising from the Rio Forest Principles, is at the heart of the wide-ranging changes affecting forestry in Britain since the mid 1990s.

This was articulated in 1994 by Sustainable Forestry: the UK programme (Department of Environment 1994). It is revealing as a barometer of concerns at the time; the publication articulating policies that were yet to be widely implemented:

- To promote a better understanding of the contribution which woodlands and forests can make to our environment and development.
- To promote public participation and co-operation between users and owners.

- To promote local involvement in the management of state forests.

The ‘social’ focus at the time, as described in the 1994 programme, was on providing public information, educating the public as to the value of woodlands and participation in woodland management through membership of voluntary bodies; aspects that were by then becoming well established in Scotland’s forestry sector. The notion of community involvement in forest governance was still vestigial. The Government’s approach to sustainable forestry as laid out in the UK Forestry Standard (Forestry Commission 1998) did little to develop the governance theme given that the Standard applied to the private as well as the public forest sector.

In 1999, Britain’s State Forests attained sustainable management certification under the Forestry Stewardship Council accredited UK Woodland Assurance Scheme (UKWAS Steering Group, 2000). This involved satisfying independent assessors that state forests met criteria concerning local communities, including local consultation, taking a constructive approach to issues raised, providing information on proposed plans and operations, maintaining traditional and permissive access and use rights, and minimising adverse impacts.

Political devolution

In 1997 the Scottish people voted for political devolution. After a break of over three centuries, the Scottish Parliament was re-established in 1999. Forestry was amongst those areas for which responsibility was devolved from the UK government to Scottish Ministers.

Since devolution, increasing the responsiveness of public agencies to community needs has been a key theme. For example, the establishment of Community Planning Partnerships in Scotland became a legal requirement in 2003 with two principal aims:

- Making sure people and communities are genuinely engaged in the decisions made on public services which affect them; allied to
- A commitment from organisations (the Scottish Executive, local government, voluntary and community groups and other public bodies) to work together in providing better public services.

Developments in the governance of state forests have reflected these processes:

- In 2000 the Forestry Commission on behalf of the Scottish Executive produced a Scottish Forestry Strategy. Community support was one of five guiding principles upon which the Strategy was based, with a recognition that ‘there should be mechanisms for participation, for sharing and explaining views, and for working towards consensus’. One of the five Strategic Directions is ‘helping communities to benefit’ with four Priorities for Action:
 - Creating wider employment opportunities.
 - Increasing opportunities for community consultation.
 - Providing opportunities for greater community involvement in forestry.
 - Supporting community ownership where this will bring local benefits.
- In 2002 policy-level engagement processes were devolved with the establishment of the Scottish Forestry Forum, an advisory grouping of forestry stakeholder with membership balanced between economic, environmental and social interests.
- In 2003 the Forestry Commission was re-organised by the establishment of country structures to respond to country priorities. Hence, in 2003 Forestry Commission Scotland was formed to work on behalf of Scottish Ministers.

- In 2004 five Regional Forestry Forums were created to advise on the development of policy and delivery of support to the distinctive regions of Scotland.

Land reform in Scotland

Rights over land has been an issue close to the hearts of the Scottish people for many centuries, with land ownership concentrated in the hands of a very few. It was therefore an early priority of the new Scottish Parliament to enact the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and so introduce:

- The right of responsible access: the act established new, clear and unambiguous statutory rights of access in Scotland.
- The community right to buy, which provides an opportunity for communities to register an interest in and then buy the land when it comes up for sale. The underlying aim is to increase involvement by communities in decisions that affect their future.
- The crofting community right to buy (crofting is an historical form of communal land tenure in Scotland), which decisively changes the balance of power between the crofting community and the land owner and gives crofting communities the right to acquire and control the croft land where they live and work.

Whilst there are now over 80 partnerships in operation between local community woodland groups and Forestry Commission Scotland, it is intended to provide further opportunities for local control of state forest land, reflecting Scottish Ministers' desire to broaden ownership and control of land in Scotland. In late 2004 a consultation on a new National Forest Land Scheme was launched. As Scotland's Forestry Minister said at the launch:

‘Our national forests contribute greatly to the economy and the environment, but also have a great deal to offer in social terms. We need to ensure that the national forest estate works harder for people in Scotland, and this new consultation paper strives to put people and communities to the top of the agenda. It is part of our work in land reform to diversify land ownership and empower communities’.

The National Forest Land Scheme will have three elements:

- Community acquisition: local people will have a range of options to get more involved in their forests including, for the first time, the flexibility to buy or lease national forest land where community control is in the public interest;
- Land for affordable housing: housing organisations would be able to buy land at a reduced price for affordable housing; and
- Sale of surplus land: communities would be given the first chance to buy national forest land that no longer fits strategic objectives, avoiding competitive bidding on the open market.

Community acquisition is based on the following principles:

- Forestry Commission Scotland will help communities achieve their desired level of involvement in the management of state forest land by providing a full range of options for community involvement; from consultation, through participation and partnerships to leasing or purchase.
- The Scheme will follow the principles of the Land Reform Act 2003, which provides the benchmark for community purchase of land in Scotland.
- The evidence required by Forestry Commission Scotland from community applications will be in proportion to the significance of the land.

- The value of the land will be established by professional external valuers.

For communities to be successful in their bid to buy or lease National Forest Land they must satisfy eight criteria:

- The community body must be eligible to buy the land.
- The land must not be Excluded Land (such as land with buildings or land leased by Forestry Commission Scotland).
- The community must have a substantial connection with the land.
- The community must have the capacity to manage the land.
- The proposal must have community support.
- The proposal must be consistent with the principles of sustainable development.
- The proposal must be in the public interest.
- The proposal should not be significantly detrimental to the management of the national forest estate.

It is expected that the National Forest Land Scheme will be introduced in 2005.

The current era of forest governance

The National Forest Land Scheme is the most recent manifestation of the current phase of state forest governance in Scotland. This 'phase' was heralded by the publication in 1999 of 'Working with communities in Scotland: our commitment' (Forestry Commission 1999). This brought together the threads described above, recognising:

'community involvement as a contribution towards the Government's commitments on sustainable forest management, rural development, urban renewal and land reform in Scotland.'

It signalled a commitment to embed forest governance in the way state forests are managed:

'The Forestry Commission's forests are owned by the nation. Listening to and working with local people, national stakeholders, urban and rural communities, is an increasingly important and major part of our work.'

It expressed the Forestry Commission's commitment to increasing the involvement of people and communities in the management of the Forestry Commission's estate through providing:

- A spectrum of opportunities for community involvement.
- A more listening, consulting, integrating and transparent approach towards the preparation of forest plans.
- Improved information, consultation on and provision of opportunities for local communities over developments and changes affecting the FC estate.
- Making a greater contribution to rural development and local jobs.
- Being a good neighbour and responsible land manager.
- Contributing to sustainable development through a partnership approach.
- Ensuring and demonstrating through the services we provide that people matter to us.

In the following year, the Forestry Commission established the Forestry for People Advisory Panel to advise Forestry Commissioners in Scotland on:

- Optimising the benefits from forestry for local communities, especially in rural areas.
- Stimulating greater community involvement in forestry.

- Developing and disseminating best practice in the encouragement and management of community involvement.

On the advice of the Forestry for People Advisory Panel, an external consultant was invited to examine how Forestry Commission Scotland should respond to the challenge of involving communities in Scotland's state forests. The report (Hobley 2002) recognised how far Forestry Commission Scotland had gone in embracing local governance agendas, but it identified that in order to go further, Forestry Commission Scotland needed to understand and adapt both its internal culture and processes, as well as its external relationships.

The report made recommendations on openness over strategy development; shared vision and understanding; adapting in increasing the responsiveness of systems and structures; staff and skills development and 'style' of operation. It emphasised that the capacity to genuinely involve communities in forest governance is closely linked to the attitudes and approaches of the organisation. It encouraged a continuing shift in Forestry Commission Scotland from letting people become involved in forestry, to actively encouraging their involvement.

This process is being strengthened by the training and development of staff to enable them to work more effectively with local communities; and the provision of tools for engagement. Forest Research has developed a toolbox for public involvement in forest and woodland planning (Hislop *et al*, 2004), providing forest managers with a wide range of techniques to facilitate proactive engagement.

From this culture change programme is emerging the outlook, confidence and clarity of mission to shift control of state forest resources towards local communities where this sought locally and is in the wider public interest.

Current partnerships between local communities and Forestry Commission Scotland take a number of forms that aim to reflect the different aspirations of each community. These range from informal agreements where the local community inputs into decision making on forest management, often including the provision of recreational or conservation benefits; to binding legal agreements where all management decisions are subject to joint agreement between the local community and Forestry Commission Scotland.

An example of the latter is the agreement with Laggan Community Association covering 1400 hectares of national forest land in the Highlands. The forest is managed jointly by the local community and Forestry Commission Scotland on the basis of a joint business plan. A community trading company has been established and is given preferential status in the tendering for any forest management work. This partnership has culminated in the opening, in September 2004, of a world class mountain bike facility which will generate economic benefits to the local community as well as providing a valuable local recreational resource.

Local governance – helping to unlock the benefits of sustainable forest management

Involving communities in the governance and management of state forests is now being understood as a key part of sustainable forest management. As a result a greater breadth of benefits are being realised from Scotland's state forests, as anticipated in the Forests and People in Rural Scotland report of 1995 (Callander 1995):

- Capacity building and life-long learning. Developing local skills in order to meet the needs of the community and of the community woodland.

- Community building and social inclusion. Community woodlands encourage local communities to become more self-reliant and to develop co-operative relationships through involvement with forest management.
- Economic development and rural employment. A significant number of community woodlands provide direct employment as well as indirect employment in associated activities.
- Environmental improvement. With a strong focus on amenity, most community groups give a high priority to improving habitats for wildlife, as well as making the woodlands diverse and interesting to visit.

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