

Growing Places: a study of social change in The National Forest

The National Forest encompasses 200 square miles of the Heart of England in the West Midlands, and constitutes a vast new forested landscape for the nation. The Forest is about much more than trees; it represents a major new resource for recreation and tourism, creating new wildlife habitats, restoring damaged landscapes and offering attractive, productive uses of farmland. The 'Growing Places' study, which took place over six months in 2005, aimed to describe processes of social change brought about by the Forest, with a view to helping the Forestry Commission (FC) and the National Forest Company (NFC) in pioneering a re-imagining of forested places as engines for sustainable development in the UK. The research revealed that the Forest is a significant driver of social change, highlighting ways in which this innovative and progressive model of social forestry is resulting not only in the growth of trees, but also in the growth of communities.



"Seeing these trees they've planted restores my faith in humanity... it's amazing that people can be so selfless as to plant a tree that is clearly for future generations"

A walker in Swadlincote, Derbyshire

Background

The National Forest is a vast, new forest-in-the-making that is transforming the physical, economic and social landscape across 200 square miles of central England. The aim is to increase woodland cover from 6% in 1991 to around one-third of the area. Working with the NFC and the FC, the 'Growing Places' study aimed to look at the ways in which this area of social, economic and environmental decline is being transformed for the better, and to begin to explore the possible linkages between changes to the natural environment (restoration/landscape change through afforestation) and the changing lives of people who live, work and spend their leisure time in the Forest area.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- explore linkages between changes to the physical and social environments in the Forest
- explore how people who live in the Forest perceive the changes that have taken place
- find out what motivates 'active' participants in the Forest through involvement in activities such as tree planting, volunteer work and education initiatives

Methods

The research involved a 'compressed ethnography' of life in the Forest. The principal method was to participate with groups or individuals as they engaged in a range of activities in the Forest, such as going for walks, going on site visits, working on farms, planting trees, attending meetings, taking photographs and doing volunteer work. In addition to desk- and web-based research of official reports and documentation, formal interviews were conducted with a wide range of people involved in Forest-related activities, projects or initiatives.

Findings

The research revealed that, generally, the National Forest is positively perceived. For many people, the Forest is closely associated with improving environmental and economic conditions, and these positive perceptions of place feed into a growing trust and support for the 'institutional' Forest (National Forest Company and partner organisations), a willingness to be associated with the Forest brand and an optimistic, forward-looking vision for the area.

There are some important linkages between the Forest and the area's changing economy. In particular, 'Growing Places' presents an analysis of the Forest as a catalyst for new networks of co-operation between economic and political actors.

Social interactions are the dominant feature of Forest experiences. There are strong linkages between landscape change and developing social capital in the Forest, with forested places providing the setting for the reconfiguration of social networks and new forms of 'connectedness'. In particular, an increase in access is leading to a significant and positive transformation of the relationship between farmers and the wider community. The research concludes, therefore, that not only trees but also communities are growing in the National Forest.

Recommendations

The 'Growing Places' study highlights some important and interesting issues that warrant further research, and identifies key areas of land management, regeneration and conservation policy to which further analysis of the National Forest project would be highly relevant.

The study shows that the Forest is providing a setting for the reconfiguration of social capital. A key recommendation is that the Forest's role in structuring social interactions between individuals and organisations, and within groups should be factored into measurements of the social sustainability of this and other regeneration projects.

The Forest is making significant, non-financial contributions to regional economy and society, through improved employee morale, a more positive outlook on life and other mental and physical health benefits. Further research is needed to demonstrate how the Forest's positive social, environmental and ethical associations deliver benefits to individuals and organisations who get involved. Such research could inform the development of a range of quantitative and qualitative measures that could be used to assess the impacts of regeneration projects. These could include the extent and quality of social interaction and capacity building at the local level, measurements of physical and mental health impacts, and assessments of facilities for physical, mental and visual access.

Partners

Lancaster University, the Forestry Commission and the National Forest Company

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Reports and publications

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