

unmanaged but we import timber, 20% of which came from illegal sources, according to a WWF report and a New Economics Foundation study points out that we are now drawing deep on the resources of other countries, including their forests, and are moving into ecological debt. The United Nations Forum on Forests has been attempting to resolve the global problems of financing sustainable forestry management but has made little progress.

BIODIVERSITY OBJECTIVES AND MANAGEMENT

The rationale for the restoration of plantations to improve biodiversity was established at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 but Forest Neighbours contend that hands-on management of woodland improves biodiversity because it allows more light to reach the forest floor leading to an increase in woodland flowers, insects and animals, as well as improving the quality and value of the potential timber resource. In contrast, research published in 2008 showed how flora and woodland birds are suffering from lack of woodland management in many of our native woods, whilst many woodland butterflies are in steep decline. Further, the Forestry Commission reported in Biodiversity in Britain's Planted Forests that tree plantations are safer from the predations of man and are a haven rich in flora and fauna.

THE DEBATE ON CLIMATE CHANGE

has been substantially reinforced by the Stern Report which showed that the situation has changed dramatically in the last 17 years and is now serious. This has led to the UK Government commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80% of 1990 levels by 2050. In 2008 it signed up to European targets to produce 15% of all energy produced in the UK from renewable sources and the recent Renewable Energy Strategy proposed that 30% of that renewable energy would come from bioenergy. Trees are the best carbon sink that we have.

RENEWABLE ENERGY STRATEGY

The main aim of the Forestry Commission's Woodfuel Strategy for England is the development of a clean, efficient and renewable energy source. It plans to bring an additional two million tonnes of wood into the market, annually, by 2020, saving 400,000 tonnes of carbon every year – the equivalent of 3.6 million barrels of crude oil and enough to supply 250,000 homes with energy.

Although woodfuel systems are more expensive to buy, the cost of running a woodfuel boiler is cheaper than an oil boiler. Woodfuel works best on a local scale – using locally grown trees in efficient boilers to provide heat for business and community building, especially in areas where there is no gas supply. It also reduces haulage costs and emissions. Carbon released by burning woodfuel in modern, efficient systems is re-absorbed by growing trees in a cycle that reduces the overall amount of carbon released into the atmosphere. There is some carbon released during the processing activities, but this negligible - particularly when compared to fossil fuels such as gas, coal or oil.

Such a project has been launched in East Anglia which will encourage landowners to

manage the 50,000 hectares of neglected woodland in the region. Similarly, Nottinghamshire County Council has replaced coal fired boilers with wood pellet boilers in 15 of its schools and plans to install another 27 thereby reducing CO2 emissions by a further 3,000 tonnes a year.

We note that the Forestry Commission's regional Biomass Advice Network is supporting a feasibility study for a wood fuel suppliers' network.

Using wood from well-managed woods provides a renewable source of fuel and other products as well as giving woodland owners an incentive to manage their land productively, improving conditions for wildlife and amenity.

OTHER USES OF WOOD

CHARCOAL from conifers is used in horticulture and agriculture. It is a carbon fixer and increases calcium, potassium, magnesium and phosphorus in the soil.

COPPICING is a reviving craft supported by Forestry Authority and Natural England.

BUILDING MATERIAL AND FURNITURE MAKING. Wood is still in widespread use as a building material and we need to grow our own sustainable hard and softwood.

A new innovative building technology using greenwood can be seen at the Weald and Downland Museum in Sussex (a repair workshop- 40 metres by 10 metres which used only 30 trees) and at Hooke Park in Dorset (workshop and student rooms).

ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS OF TREES

The 1982 UN World Charter for Nature sets out "human duties towards the earth" which includes trees.

AGRICULTURE There are benefits to raising animals on open ground but with a spread of trees to provide shelter.

RECREATION. Woodland is also about the quality of life. Increasing numbers of people value them for recreation and exploring wildlife. "In financial terms the social and environmental benefits of forestry amount to £885m a year in England. A recent study in the West Midlands found that woodland saved the NHS £4.5m a year." Jonathan Hughes, Forestry Commission policy officer quoted in the Guardian 28.6.05.

EDUCATION A Forestry Commission study – Open Space and Social Inclusion: Local Woodland Use in Central Scotland - revealed that people's experience of woods as children is strongly associated with woodland use in later life. At present children are experiencing wildlife through film rather than in woods and fields.

Forest Schools offer people regular opportunities to achieve, and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands on learning experiences in a local woodland. People regularly visit throughout the year. Games are played and achievable tasks set - hide and seek, making mud pies, building shelters, learning to use tools, to light fires and cook.

The Woodland Trust also has an educational programme for schools. The Forest Education Initiative was founded to increase young people's understanding of the importance of woodlands, forests and the wood processing industries.

FLOOD CONTROL. Loss of trees has added to flood threats as trees absorb enormous amounts of water. Farmers experimenting in Wales found that woodland absorbed 60

times more water than grazing pasture.

LANDSCAPE. Trees are an important part of the landscape which is a result of a mix of geology, landform, soils, weather and human and wildlife activity which should all be respected. Trees come in different shapes and sizes and colours which enrich the scenery.

TRAINING AND WORK EXPERIENCE

The Forestry Commission has suspended funding for training in woodland management but may reinstate it. We suggest that this would be an important step in making forestry the important economic, social and environmental industry which is a government goal. Timber companies report a shortage of craftsmen with the necessary skills.

An example of a social enterprise which is using woodland to further training and work experience is Hill Holt, a community woodland project in 14 hectares in Lincolnshire. Education and vocational training is provided for 36 “disaffected youths”. The Forestry Commission researched the success of Hill Holt and found that the wood is a calming environment and a good space for physical activity. The focus is on developing skills in horticulture, forestry, woodwork, animal care, conservation and green woodworking which lead the young people on to further education and eco-friendly work. Spin-offs are furniture making, eco-burials, design and construction of earth composting toilets and rainwater collection systems.

IMPACT ON THE TIMBER INDUSTRY

We have listed the uses and benefits of trees and were impressed by the evidence from the England Forest Industries Partnership which pointed out the negative impact of the restoration policy on future timber supplies, the existing shortage of regional supplies and the removal of commercially viable stands. This could lead to the closure of timber yards and sawmills. An important but undervalued industry is under threat from this policy.

CONCLUSION

The restoration of open habitats entails destroying existing habitats and is the waste of a scarce resource. We support a much more energetic and coherent forestry policy and the development of the timber industry. Unlike fossil fuels, timber is a renewable source of energy as well as being a renewable building material. We agree with the findings of the POST Survey UK Forests : a sustainable resource for the future - of the need to increase the amount of forest cover in the UK and to acknowledge the importance of trees in the health of the planet. As well as being useful, trees are a source of delight and could be seen as one of the most useful, productive, protective and aesthetic creatures on earth.

Sources:

Biodiversity in Britain’s Planted Forests. Forestry Commission 2003

Woodfuel Strategy for England. Forestry Commission 2008

Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) Seminar in January 2007 UK Forests : a sustainable resource for the future. Chaired by the Chair of the Forestry Commission. 2007

Forest Neighbours May 2009

CASE STUDY OF A RESTORATION PROJECT ON THE NORTH STAFFORDSHIRE MOORS

In 1972 55 hectares of grassland, which had been used for rough grazing, was planted with conifers. This was an experiment on a treeless landscape in the highest village in the UK. Twenty years on, when the plantation needed thinning, it was sold to the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust (SWT), who planned to restore the land to “a habitat more representative of the Leek Moors”.

The restoration plan entailed felling 80% of the conifers over 25 years with block felling every five years. People who were concerned about the plan contacted the Forestry Commission who said that its preferred option was to clear the conifers over 50 years with no net loss of trees and replace them with broadleaves. Because the restoration was funded by the Woodland Grant Scheme the Forestry Commission informed the Parish Council which responded that there was no support locally for the conversion as trees were a rare commodity and valued for their shelter for people and wildlife. The Council was also concerned about the impact on the water table and the drainage regime in the surrounding area but its comments were unheeded.

In November 2002, without warning, the contractors moved in to the woods. The impact of heavy machinery and mass felling destroyed habitats. Species were demolished by a combination of the bulldozers and the brash fires which burnt for three weeks. The dry stone walls within the plantation, which the Trust claim were full of very long-lived lichens, were destroyed. The drainage system was damaged. Seedlings, planted under a compromise agreement to replace some of the trees, became waterlogged. Only about 10% have survived.

There has been a strong campaign against the felling by Forest Neighbours who live in an area where there is a need for shelter. The traditional method was to plant sycamores around homesteads because of their ability to withstand a harsh climate and strong winds. Therefore residents welcomed the conifers which have been beneficial to both humans and wildlife. They have reduced the windspeed, raised the fog, reduced the amount of snow ploughing necessary and are a habitat for a herd of red deer and 60 species of bird, five of which are declining species. The trees were also a place of tranquillity and delight before the felling took place but they could become so again with proper management. FN favours thinning and opening up of rides by people working in a slow and considered way, repairing the damaged landscape

As the Parish Council feared, there were flash floods after the felling which swept away the water voles, a protected species. They had been there for over 8 years and acknowledged by the Peak Park and SWT as being present, but they have now disappeared.

The impact on the birds in and around the plantation has also been serious. The SWT's Prime Objective is to maintain favourable conditions for the breeding moorland birds,

particularly curlew and snipe. There are 3,800 hectares of Leek Moors SSSI but the conifer plantation is only 1.5% of the moors, which would not be suitable for nesting birds for many years while the tree stumps and the brash rot down. In fact, over the last 30 years or so, 37 species of breeding birds have nested in the plantation, including 3 pairs of long-eared owls (there are only 15 pairs in the whole of Staffordshire) and 5 other declining species of bullfinch, goldcrest, redpoll, redstart and song thrush. Another 23 species use the interface with the woods and the surrounding fields. The Trust is destroying a habitat that sheltered 60 bird species in exchange for the encouragement of 2 species which in any case are returning to the open ground which is their natural habitat. The density of birds in the woods compares favourably with the 8-10 species on the open grassland. (SWT Annual Bird Surveys)

The decline in bird numbers is nothing to do with the trees. It is to do with land management, particularly rush cutting, as now acknowledged by Natural England.

CONCLUSION

The community is united in its opposition to the destruction of the woods. In the spirit of Earth Rights, these trees have survived against the odds in the highest inhabited area of England and deserve to live on, enhancing the landscape, sheltering the people and the wildlife, masking the noise from the road, providing heating and timber. With proper management they could provide work as well as recreation for local people.

The restoration programme was implemented to enhance biodiversity but the Forestry Commission's report on the Biodiversity in Britain's Planted Forests shows that plantations are teeming with wildlife. The evergreens provide all year round food and shelter. The irony is that the biodiversity has been damaged by the series of fellings since 2002. Local bird watchers and entomologists who visited the woods to observe the wide range of species have logged their decline and say that the woods are no longer worth visiting in their now altered condition.

Forest Neighbours
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