

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONTEXT AND AIM

This study provides evidence of the public value of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England (PFE). The aim was to establish whether people have different perceptions and expectations of publicly owned forests compared to those in other forms of ownership.

We compare three aspects of the people-forest relationship:

- Comparison between tenure types: does the PFE provide different, more or fewer benefits than other woodlands?
- Comparison within society: what social benefits do the trees and range of woodlands in the PFE in England provide, and which parts of society currently use them or feel welcome to use them?
- Comparison between woodland types: do particular kinds of woodland in the PFE provide different, more or fewer benefits than other parts and to different parts of society?

SUMMARY OF APPROACH

The study consisted of two phases. Phase 1 identified and analysed existing evidence. Phase 2 collected and analysed new data to fill gaps in existing knowledge.

New data was gathered using two complementary approaches:

- a statistically representative survey of the adult population of England
- 10 discussion groups covering a range of diversity groups and interests, held in four locations.

The survey and discussion groups were structured around the following themes:

1. use of woodlands and benefits derived from them
2. knowledge, perceived significance and impact of ownership
3. expectations and priorities for the future provision and management of the PFE and woodlands under other ownership.

Both survey data and discussion group results represent public opinion, perception and experience, rather than right or wrong statements. The public opinion survey provides statistically representative and generalisable results. The qualitative data adds details and explanations to help understand patterns in the survey data and the underlying thinking and values that influence public opinions. Neither replaces the need to consider the wider evidence. However, the study provides a clear understanding of the portfolio of needs and expectations identified by society and clarifies the mandate for decisions about the PFE.

KEY FINDINGS

1 Over half of the population visits woodlands. Many expressed a strong emotional connection with trees and woodlands, and associated a wide range of benefits with them.

Tenure

2 Although only one third of respondents claimed to know who owned the woods that they visit, and about one tenth felt that it was important, most have clear and strong views about how public money

should be spent and what benefits public forests should provide.

3 This is supported by the fact that 70% of respondents could list values for publicly owned woodlands, while only 55% of respondents could list values for privately owned woodlands.

4 All categories of values associated with woodlands are associated more strongly with publicly owned than private ones. Recreation, access and facilities such as well-maintained paths, car parking, toilets and cafes were most frequently reported as important.

5 Public expectations for future benefits from the PFE were also higher than for comparable benefits from other woodland. For all woodland types they prioritised wildlife habitat provision followed by recreation, landscape conservation, climate change mitigation and education.

6 Many participants felt that the PFE was run cost-effectively; some were surprised how little public resource was actually used. There was often strong support for public ownership to guarantee access for the public, and sustainable woodland management in the future.

7 Most participants in the discussion groups expressed a strong wish to maintain or increase the current extent and composition of public woodland ownership.

Society

8 Those who reported using the PFE are more likely to be older, male, married, white, have children, be in full-time employment and live in rural areas, than those who reported using other woods, or did not know the ownership of the woods they used. They were also more likely to visit woods more frequently.

9 Women were more likely than men to give particular reasons for visiting a woodland, more likely to expect community involvement on private woodlands, and to choose woodlands for reasons of safety and child friendliness.

10 Disabled people had a slight preference for dog-walking as a reason to visit woodlands, were more likely to appreciate woodlands for the scenery, variety of trees, fresh air and their wider societal benefits than others, and less likely to cite physical activities as a value. Those working with disabled people would like to see better locally available communication and information about access (suitable paths and facilities).

11 People who described themselves as belonging to a BME group were less likely to value public woodlands for walking and wildlife, and more likely to value them for climate change and tourism than ethnically white people. Having information accessible/available about access rights, facilities and activities were raised as encouraging use of woodlands.

12 Older people are more likely than others to value woods for wildlife; and younger and middle-aged people more likely to value woods for activities.

13 Those on lower incomes are more likely to value woods as a place to get away, or take the children; while those on higher incomes are more likely to value woods for their contribution to the landscape. There appears to be a trend for more people in lower income brackets to expect more from the public estate.

Woodland type

14 The PFE is very diverse in both woodland ecology and facilities provided for public use. This research attempted to

distinguish between them in exploring public values. Points made in discussion group, however, often focused on a few well known 'honeypot' sites and it is unclear that public opinion relates to the full spectrum of PFE resources.

15 People value a wide range of forest types, particularly native broadleaved forests. Conifer woodlands were perceived by many as unattractive, but most valued variety over one particular type, and considered that the type of woodland did not matter as much as having access through them.

16 Most discussants perceived a need to increase the area of broadleaved woodlands. Felling trees or increasing timber production was seen by many as reducing rather than maintaining or improving these benefits. Discussants showed little awareness of the forest industry, woodland management, or the possibility that harvesting timber could contribute to climate change mitigation.

Adding value to the PFE

17 Business partnerships are useful for providing facilities or attractions on some

PFE sites and as an income stream for the Forestry Commission. The main suggestions by business partners for improving existing partnerships were:

- have clearer lines of communication and more liaison (stable contact point and less bureaucracy)
- a more business-like structure to charges (set nationally or transparently across the FC; less bureaucracy)
- a longer-term perspective to issuing leases to allow more investment and reduce risk to partners.

18 The PFE is seen to provide a diverse resource, invest in a wide range of public facilities and provisions, and maintain larger sites than under private ownership. This is perceived as necessary to accommodate multiple demands and needs.

19 Public expectations for future management priorities for the PFE centre around habitat/landscape conservation, wider environmental and climate benefits, education, and recreation.