

Social science in forestry

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The Social Research Unit came into being late in 2001, to consolidate an increasing programme of work, being carried out within the Silviculture Branches, which was concerned more with the relationships between people and trees than with the science of creating and managing woodlands. The main impetus for this work is based on the idea that sustainable forestry, derived from the 1993 Helsinki Conference, is the result of economic development that is positive in its implications for the environment and for society (Forestry Commission, 1998). Conversely, forestry development that is not properly positioned in its social context is unlikely to yield its full potential in terms of economic or environmental benefits. Our task, then, is to try to understand these social contexts and make recommendations for good practice.

The importance of trees and green space within the urban environment: Soho Square, London

Autumn colours in Vermont, USA

Families enjoying the walking trail at Bolderwood, New Forest



Introduction

One of the first activities was to draw together existing related work (funded partly by the Forestry Commission and carried out in universities) and to discuss possible future directions. This took the form of a seminar in 2000 and a conference in 2001 (O'Brien, 2001; O'Brien and Claridge, 2002; Figure 1a and b).

Figure 1

Publications of (a) the Social Forestry 2000 Seminar and (b) the Social Science Research 2001 Conference.



Our understanding of social forestry is continuing to develop, and our work now concentrates on the following central themes:

- Governance and public involvement
- Social and cultural values
- Health and well-being
- Education and learning
- Recreation, access and tourism.

Governance and public involvement

Public involvement in environmental decision-making is one of the central themes of Sustainable Development (UNCED, 1992). Although participation is focused here on poverty alleviation, it also accords with late 20th century thought on governance and democracy, especially in relation to environmental problems. The failure of representative democracy to take full account of local views and needs, especially in relation to developments affecting the environment, has led to a preoccupation with *deliberative democracy*, in which people's views are sought not in a simple vote, but through fair and well-informed debate. Max Hislop has devoted much of his time in the past two years to investigating methods for applying these ideas in a forestry context.

Forest managers, just like managers in many other industries, have to respond to societal changes. Increasingly they are faced with demands from the public and expectations from policy makers to involve stakeholders in forestry decisions. This presents the manager with many challenges:

- Who should be involved and how equitable is the decision-making process?
- What methods are best employed to involve people?
- What are the resource implications?
- How should we deal with conflicting demands?
- What are the objectives of public investment in forestry?

New ideas and approaches to environmental decision-making are being tested with Forest Enterprise planning teams in forest district pilot studies. Based on this research, guidance for managers suggests that:

- Public involvement should be recognised as a legitimate management activity in its own right, rather than just a part of a forest planning process.

- A planned approach to public involvement is advisable to ensure an equitable, open, honest and efficient decision-making process.
- Forest managers need intimate knowledge of the social issues associated with the forest prior to public engagement.
- Open and defensible means to prioritise between demands on limited resources need to be developed.

Social and cultural values

People’s attitudes and behaviours are based on the values that they hold. These values collectively form the identity of individuals and communities, and are often spatially related. For example, local inhabitants of the Forest of Dean identify themselves as ‘foresters’ by association with the forest. Liz O’Brien has been conducting research into social and cultural values.

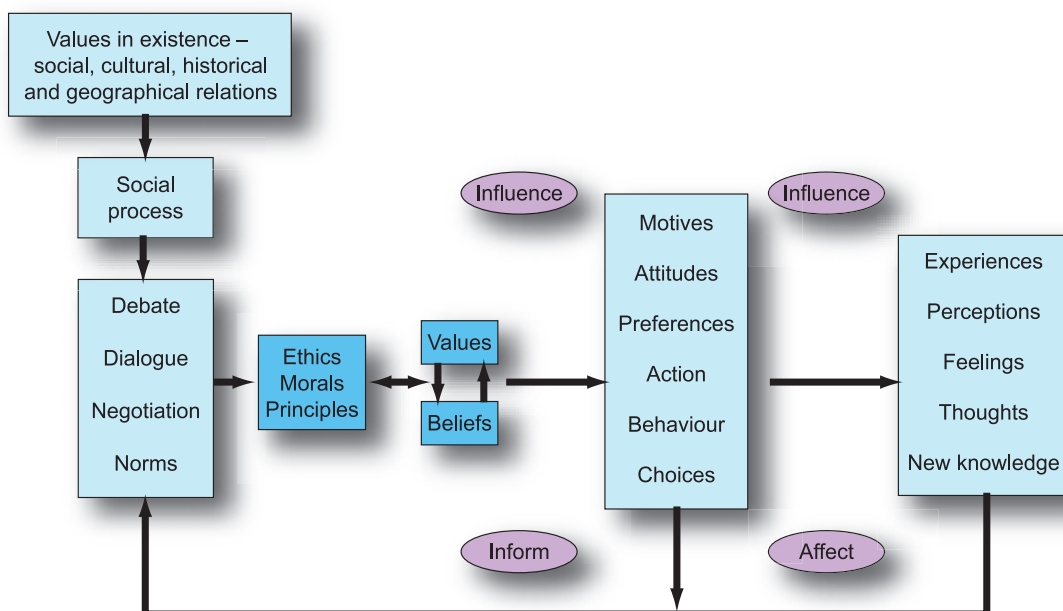
Values are the standards people use to judge how things ‘ought to be’. They relate to ethical issues and our deeply held beliefs. Figure 2 illustrates how values are constructed within society through a social process of debate between individuals and institutions. Values can

shift over time and be re-negotiated or reviewed through further deliberation. The aim of the research was to gain a greater understanding of the values and meanings people associate with woodlands and trees and draw out the implications for future forestry policy development. Data were collected in England and Vermont, USA in order to look at citizens’ values in differing cultural contexts. In-depth interviews and discussion groups with members of the public were the main methods of data collection and included citizens from a range of age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. Key findings from the research include:

- The importance of personal memories and associations with particular trees and woods.
- Woodlands as a social setting for families, communities and friends to interact and undertake activities together.
- The significance of people’s feelings of well-being associated with trees and woods: emotional, mental and physical.
- Publics’ values for woodlands do not stand apart from wider issues of concern over changes in society and concerns over environmental and cultural change.

Figure 2

Schematic representation of value formation.



Health and well-being

The Forestry Commission, with its agency Forest Enterprise, represents the UK's largest single controller of public land. At the same time, community forests are being developed in and around centres of population, in recognition of the benefits of such initiatives in building social capacity, as well as providing much needed naturalistic public space. In 2002 the Forestry Commission hosted three expert consultations, in England, Scotland and Wales, in which environmental and health professionals were brought together to explore ways in which they could work towards increasing public health and well-being (Tabbush and O'Brien, 2003; Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3

Health and Well-being publication: outcomes from expert consultations in England, Scotland and Wales during 2002.



Inactivity is a significant factor in many of the most common major illnesses: obesity, heart disease, kidney disease, and some types of cancer and diabetes. Active involvement of people in outdoor activities in forests and green areas therefore has direct significance for health. There is growing understanding in health policy that sustainable health requires not only effective medical approaches, but also healthy environments and healthy lifestyles, to promote psychological/mental as well as physical health. This is the idea of health and well-being, as derived from contact with naturalistic environment; something more than just health as the absence of illness.

Figure 4

Personal development: the positive effects that outdoor activities can have on young people.



Education and learning

Forests offer a significant resource for learning, both in the sense of school learning and in the sense of social learning, in which publics, forest managers and experts learn from each other. This latter sense has implications for governance and public involvement.

Forest School

The idea of Forest School, which has Danish origins, has been championed in Britain by Bridgewater College. Their website (Bridgewater College, 2003) includes a definition:

Forest School is a unique educational experience using the outdoor environment. Its principal purpose is to tailor an educational curriculum to a participant's preferred learning style (rather than vice versa) whilst using the outdoor environment as a 'classroom'. The majority of the Foundation Stage of the Early Learning Goals curriculum and the National Curriculum can be met in this unique learning setting. Its philosophy is to encourage and inspire individuals of any age and any group, through mastery of small achievable tasks in a woodland environment, to grow in confidence, self-esteem and independence. As the individual's self-esteem develops, the tasks become more complex but, at every stage, tasks are always achievable.

Forest Research is working with the New Economics Foundation to evaluate the outcomes of two Forest School projects in Wales, in terms of community benefits (Social Capital), self-esteem, and learning.

Recreation, access and tourism

For the public to benefit from recreational use of forests and woodlands, they must have access to these spaces. It follows that forestry can only be considered socially sustainable if the access needs of many different sections of society are catered for. This raises questions about who benefits from forest access and who does not.

Public access to the countryside and its associated recreation and tourism have in the past been marginalised around the primary production function. These days, recreation and tourism are being placed nearer to the centre of rural development. Tourism is an increasingly important element of the rural economy. However, the links between forestry and tourism are poorly understood. Suzanne Martin is exploring these links through in-depth local research within England, Scotland and Wales, using qualitative and quantitative social research techniques. This involves working with a range of key decision-makers as well as tourism and recreation businesses to investigate the current and potential role of forest and woodland environments in the tourism sector.

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