

Alternative models of Scottish forestry

One of the outcomes of the financial crash of 2008 has been the growing tendency since for society at large to question the 'status quo' in all areas of life, and ask themselves – who benefits? The many or the few?

Forestry is not immune from this – but in some respects has been 'ahead of the curve', in that the notion of delivery of public benefits through forestry has been ingrained in our thinking for some time now, and we have been very good at selling the benefits of woodlands and their management to the public at large.

However, before we get too smug, we have not been all that good at critical self-appraisal: because our industry overall can deliver easy wins on the sustainability front compared with, say, the car industry, we seldom question some of the inefficiencies in our methods. In a similar vein, large capital investments in the industry are welcomed because of the jobs and economic activity they bring – but we rarely ask whether the same investment, deployed in a different way, might deliver even greater economic benefits.

There is also the question of the balance between private gain and public benefit, when taxpayer support is involved, whether it be grants or tax benefits – have we got the balance right?

What makes these questions important ones is that our industry is fairly uniform and dominated by a particular model of production forestry: you will see a similar picture wherever you are in the country, whilst alternative management models tend to be niche operations at present. So any issues that do arise from that dominant model are clearly going to have far-reaching implications, not least in terms of its resilience to changes that we know are coming (climate change to name but one).

It is in this context that a major new study from the Forest Policy Group (see text box) highlights the lack of diversity in Scottish forestry, in respect of one particular aspect: woodland ownership. Written by Andy Wightman (who incidentally is himself a forester, though better known as a writer and researcher on land issues) – the study explores the pattern of forest ownership in Scotland, and contrasts it with the situation elsewhere in Europe. It is a ground-breaking piece of work and worth reading in full (available from the FPG website).

Forest Policy Group

The Forest Policy Group seeks to further the development of sustainable forestry in Scotland, by contributing informed inputs to the policy debate. Its membership is drawn from woodland organisations, forestry and land use professionals and timber users, who subscribe to a view of forestry in which:

- environmental and social issues are treated as core parts of forestry on an equal footing with timber-related economic interests; and
- diversity is actively fostered – diversity of tree species and woodland types, woodland ownership, management approaches, timber production and processing and wider economic opportunities.

www.forestpolicygroup.org

Two striking facts emerge: that the vast majority (over 90%) of privately-owned forest in Scotland is owned by landed estates or investment owners; and that over 93% of Scotland's privately owned forest area is held in holdings of over 100ha. In contrast European forests are typically owned by a greater diversity of owners - and in far greater numbers, as holdings are generally smaller.

So if woodland ownership in Scotland is far from diverse, we have a clue as to why perhaps the industry more generally is fairly uniform. What are the alternatives?

Community Forestry

Community forestry is well established in Scotland - the first community woodland (Wooplaw) came into being 25 years ago. However, whilst the sector has grown considerably over the past few years (the Community Woodlands Association now represents around 150 community woodlands), another subtle but significant change has occurred in recent years. Whilst early community woodland projects were often driven primarily by social or environmental interests, more recently the economic opportunities of productive woodland have become key elements in community projects.

No doubt this has been influenced in part by the type of woodlands that have been available for communities to purchase, not least through FCS's excellent National Forest Land Scheme (NFLS). Nevertheless, the consequences of increasing areas of commercial woodland being managed primarily for local community benefit are likely to provide an intriguing – and positive - contrast with the status quo.

Woodland Crofts

A woodland croft is a croft with sufficient tree cover overall to be considered a woodland; like all crofts they are only available in the Highlands and Islands. However here they offer crofters access to woodland to manage in support of their lifestyles, and sometimes livelihoods.

As yet there are few woodland crofts; those that exist have arisen in various ways, but in the future the main route to the establishment of more is expected to be via the creation of new crofts from existing woodland. They are commonly thought of as a strand of community forestry (and of course communal working is a feature of the crofting tradition), partly perhaps because they are an option available to community groups via the the NFLS; however there is no requirement in law for them to be community owned.

So whilst communities are leading the way - 9 new community-owned woodland crofts were recently created on Mull, with others in development in places like Tighnabruaich and Lochcarron – private landowners are also creating woodland crofts. In some cases these are for the benefit of the owner themselves, or with a particular tenant in mind, but in other places such as Roy Bridge, private owners are proposing to create numbers of new crofts to be offered openly to suitable applicants.

Roy Bridge woodland crofts

This project involves converting two privately owned parcels of woodland near Roybridge into 5 woodland crofts, probably for sale to owner-occupiers. At present, plans are still being worked up and will not be finalised until applicants themselves have added their own input. The aim is to provide affordable access to commercial woodland for individuals/families – with the opportunity to build a home and to earn an income from managing and harvesting the timber. The Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust (HSCHT) are advising on ways to maintain the housing as affordable in the longer-term.

The parcels of woodland are basically commercial and ready or near ready to harvest. Applicants would need experience of forestry work and so members of the FCA would be ideally suited. Additional merit would be given to those from within the local community.

Interested? - for further information, email alan.reeder1@yahoo.co.uk

Woodlots

Woodlots are the new arrival on the scene. Inspired by the tradition of woodlots in North America (Wikipedia has a nice explanation of these), the newly formed Scottish Woodlot Association is promoting the establishment of woodlots in Scotland (see <http://scottishwoodlotassociation.co.uk>). Their model involves woodlot licence holders managing small parcels of woodland (10-50ha) on long-term leases to produce timber and other benefits as small-scale forestry enterprises. Like woodland crofts they will potentially offer affordable access to woodland, but not being tied to crofting legislation, could be available anywhere in the country.

The feature all these alternatives have in common is the intensity of their management. Rather than occasional bursts of activity often several years apart, with intermittent 'supervisory' visits in between, these models all involve local people engaging with the woodland on an ongoing (weekly or even daily) basis. Such an approach is likely to deliver enhanced public benefits, and whatever your own thoughts on the particular merits of these alternatives, there is no doubt that in these uncertain times Scottish forestry badly needs a greater diversity of approaches.

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