

Irish Forests and Recreation

The Multi - Use Forest Model

Forests have been traditionally perceived solely as producers of wood. The perception is being gradually supplanted, particularly in the Western world, by a multipurpose model as proposed in the EU Forest Action Plan (2006). The Plan requires an acknowledgement of their social and cultural values- “*attractive to city dwellers, they provide opportunities for recreational and healthy activities and represent a not inconsiderable cultural heritage*”. Urbanisation is one of the major driving forces shaping this model. 62% of the population of Ireland has been defined as urban in the 2011 census returns. The increased demand for access to forests is recognized as an important aspect of sustainable forestry. Research has shown that the value of trails is currently greater in Ireland for the domestic user than for overseas visitors. For both categories the demand for trails is likely to be greatest in urban areas and around existing popular tourist venues.

Forest Recreation in Ireland

Coillte, National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and Waterways Ireland are the main providers of access to publicly owned lands for recreation. COFORD has conducted a review of research needs for forest recreation. It established that the impacts of urban generated demands on the resource should be anticipated and managed in order to optimise people’s experience and also to prevent any significant damage to the resource. In forests used intensively for recreation, the forest manager has to take into account a range of extra management issues. Guidance is provided in Forest Service Recreation Guidelines.

The value of forests for recreational activities is reflected in the total number of annual visits to western European forests. It is cited, for the mid 1990’s, as being in the region of 1.4 billion – equivalent to an average of 6.5 visits per person per year. Clinch provides a figure of 8.9 million visitors to Irish forests for 1998, representing 2.2 visits per person per annum. Fitzpatrick and Associates have estimated that the figure more than doubled between 1998 and 2005, with 18 million people visiting Irish Forests per annum, representing 4.5 visits per person. The demand for forest recreation in most Western European countries has peaked. Further expansion would probably lead to problems of overcrowding in some countries. In the future it seems likely that demand will increase for a higher quality of forest recreation experience (e.g. more organised and specialised recreation activities and a higher expectation in relation to visitor facilities).

As the Irish figure of visits per capita is less than the European average, it is likely that the expansion of public use of forests for recreation will continue for the next number of years. While the ecological impacts of recreation use have been a central topic in forest recreation research, social impacts, in particular crowding, have received little attention. Forests within easy access of urban areas face increasing pressure – a situation which may arise in the Dublin Region. Coillte have an active programme of trail installation in many such locations. The Dublin Mountains Partnership to which Coillte is affiliated has a programme of trail development which will ultimately link the City to the Wicklow Mountains National Park.

The Bacon Report (2004) determined that the contribution of forest recreation to the economy was in the order of €37million per annum. Fitzpatrick and Associates (2005) estimated that the annual 18 million visits to Irish forests provide a non-market value of €97 million or €5.40 per person. The total economic activity generated by domestic forest users is estimated at €268 million. Walking tourism generally by overseas visitors accounts for €138 million per annum.

European COST Action E33 ‘*Forests for recreation and nature tourism*’ explored, inter alia, the economic and social values and benefits of forest recreation and nature tourism. The study showed that they can make important contributions to the rural economy by generating revenue and employment directly in forest-based enterprises.

Forest Recreation and Wellbeing

Societal wellbeing covers a range of factors including improvements to physical, social and mental health. Generally research is seeking to demonstrate how forests can contribute to peoples wellbeing. Many European countries in recent years have been acknowledging the likely human health benefits of forests. The UK National Health Service, for example, has initiated a novel scheme to create recuperative forests to aid patient recovery, boost staff morale, and provide woodland areas for patients. However research lags behind the demand for the use of forests. There is still a need to strengthen the body of data to support the contentions. It includes research developed through links with medical science. Pertinent questions include: can forests contribute to health and restoration and provide social spaces where people can spend time with friends and family, but also provide places to meet others and develop new social networks? Can activities such as learning and volunteering in woods improve confidence and self esteem and provide meaningful activities for people? What is the importance of a green infrastructure approach that links ecosystem services to people's wellbeing? Health impact assessment is one of the tools being developed which looks at health benefits derived from, for example, activities in healthy environments such as forests.

There is substantial evidence that links the natural environment with good physical health and psychological wellbeing. Studies have demonstrated the natural restorative effects of forests both by their visual presence and from access to them. Forests have the capacity to absorb people and still provide a place where people can feel removed from the everyday and its demands. Research has also shown that moderate physical activity can promote mood changes in people with mild to moderate depression.

Urban Forestry

Urban forestry is an evolving discipline. It is aimed at the integrated planning and management of all tree-based resources in urban environments. The FAO have adopted the term *urban and periurban forests* (UPF) to refer to wooded lands as well as trees in parks, gardens, tree-lined streets and squares, undeveloped areas, and transportation and river corridors. Urban forestry has become a key focus of forestry policy and management in Britain and in some other European countries. Urban forest resources, though small in relative terms compared to natural resources, cover millions of hectares of land and provide multiple highly-demanded goods and services. Urban forestry is firmly embedded in the concepts of traditional forestry including sustained yield. The urban forest is an important component of green infrastructure whose objectives are now included in Irish regional planning guidance.

Forests and Wilderness

The European parliament in 2009 adopted a resolution on wilderness which included recommendations to undertake a study on the values of wilderness; to catalyse a development of new wilderness areas (restoration and rewilding), and promote the values of wilderness in association with NGO's and local communities. Areas of commercially non-viable forests in Ireland (e.g. Lodgepole pine with a yield class of 12 or less on blanket bog) would lend themselves to rewilding. The process would emphasise the influence of natural processes on shaping the forests of the future with limited human interventions and would facilitate natural regeneration including regeneration of low density broadleaf scrub forest. Management interventions would include the reshaping of forest composition, the restoration of blanket bog, and the creation of riparian corridors. An EU -based Wilderness Working Group has been established to develop Wild Europe initiatives. The group has defined wilderness as "... *large unmodified or only slightly modified natural areas, governed by natural processes, without human intervention, infrastructure or permanent habitation, which should be protected and overseen so as to preserve their natural condition and to offer people the opportunity to experience the spiritual quality of nature*". Pristine conditions do not exist in Ireland. However Coillte, jointly with NPWS, are currently exploring the feasibility of setting aside c.9000 hectares of forest and national park lands as a wilderness area in the Nephin Beg Forest, Co Mayo. 6870 hectares will be designated as primitive and semi-primitive zones.