

Creating a Sustainable Forest – The National Forest

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SUMMARY

The National Forest is radical. It is achieving large-scale landscape change over a huge area and it could be seen to defy many conventional theories of land management. However, when seen in the context of sustainability it makes complete sense. A new Forest is being created for the nation that enacts and demonstrates the principles of sustainable development. It is burgeoning because it is based on those principles: linking the benefits of environmental improvement, economic regeneration and development and enhancement of quality of life. The interdependency of environmental, social and economic goals is an investment for a truly national forest for future, as well as present, generations.

A PHYSICAL DEFINITION

In physical terms The National Forest is set to transform some 200 square miles (500 square kilometres) of the Midlands of England with a mosaic of woodland, open country, farmland and settlements. Around a third (33%) of the Forest area will be wooded. The National Forest is located in the heart of England, and lies between Birmingham (to the south west), Nottingham (to the north east) and Leicester (to the east).

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The idea of The National Forest was pioneered in the 1980's by the Countryside Commission, the Government's then advisory body with the remit of protecting the countryside and making it more



Figure 1. The Location of The National Forest

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accessible for the public to enjoy. In 1987 the Commission published a policy document called “Forestry in the Countryside” which advocated the benefits of multi-purpose forestry. Throughout the 20th Century, new forests were usually planted in the UK with timber production as the predominant objective. They were planted on the cheapest land, miles from centres of population, as coniferous monocultures, often on inaccessible hillsides and all too often in a manner that offended lovers of landscape and wildlife habitats alike.

But, it was argued that it did not have to be like that. Why not plant woodland to positively restore or enhance damaged or featureless landscapes in locations close to where people live and could therefore enjoy their woodland surroundings? That principle is still valid nearly 20 years later- there are no reasons why forests cannot work for their living – producing timber, attracting visitors and tourists, stimulating the local economy with forest-related development, enhancing the environment for both businesses and homes, and generally improving the quality of life.

Two major initiatives were proposed to exemplify the ideas contained within the 1987 Countryside Commission document. One was the Community Forest programme which consisted of twelve forests on the fringes of some of the UK’s largest cities and conurbations. The second was The National Forest. As a truly national exemplar of what their vision meant, the Countryside Commission championed the creation of a “New National Forest” in one of five possible locations in the Midlands – geographically and symbolically in the heart of England. After painstaking research, public consultation and a competitive process of selection, the present site was selected in 1990.

THE LANDSCAPE

The National Forest encompasses the remains of the two ancient Forests (Charnwood in the east and Needwood in the west), the coalfield of North West Leicestershire, the rolling farmlands and former coal and clay-workings of South Derbyshire and the industrial transport corridor of the Trent Valley in East Staffordshire.

Its landscapes are varied but, even allowing for the remnants of its two ancient forests, industry and agriculture had denuded the area of its trees over the centuries. In a country that is near the bottom of the European league in terms of its wooded cover, the selected location of The National Forest stood out; it had only 6% tree cover. In recent history, the area was not even regarded as suitable for forestry- the land was “too good” and there were “too many people”. Indeed over the previous decade it had notched up a meagre average of 10 hectares of planting per year and this was virtually all restocking existing woodland. In addition there were significant areas of derelict land and land scarred by mineral working. The area also had its own population of nearly 200,000 people and was within a 1½ hours drive time of a further 10 million people in nearby towns and cities.

THE NATIONAL FOREST COMPANY- THE CATALYST FOR THE FOREST

With Government backing, the Countryside Commission established a team charged with preparing, over a three-year period, a Forest Strategy and a Business Plan. The Strategy describes the future vision for the Forest, how all the various land uses and aspirations will fit and how the Forest concept can be brought to reality. The Strategy underwent a wide-ranging public consultation exercise and a strategic environmental assessment. The first Forest Strategy (Countryside Commission, 1994) was widely agreed and endorsed by Government. The current Forest Strategy, 2004-14, (The National Forest, 2004) was consulted and approved in the same manner. This Strategy also has much in common with its predecessor. It remains the strategic document to which the NFC works and, with its annual Corporate Plan Targets, is judged against.

The Business Plan made the case for financial incentives attuned to the achievement of Forest creation by means of partnership working with as wide a range of participants as possible. It also recommended the type of organisation that would be needed to spearhead and co-ordinate the Forest’s implementation.

Government accepted these and in April 1995 announced the establishment of The National Forest Company (NFC). The NFC has 16 full-time and 3 part-time staff and 9 publicly appointed Directors and is responsible for implementing the Forest. The NFC does so in partnership with a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations. The NFC is independent of all the existing agencies but works closely with them. As an enabling body its powers are deliberately limited and do not duplicate or usurp those of any existing authorities.

In addition to being a company limited by guarantee, the NFC also has the formal status of being a Non-Departmental Public Body sponsored by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The NFC receives an annual budget currently set at £3.7 million. The NFC also seeks money from other sources, for specific activities or projects; such as European, national or regional regeneration funding – usually in the form of challenge funds, commercial sponsorship, Lottery funds and so forth.

TARGETS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Targets for the NFC are ambitious. First and foremost, of course, there is the creation of the Forest itself. The aim is to achieve 13,500 hectares of new planting, with around 70% of this in the first 15 years.

By the end of March 2006 woodland cover has almost trebled - to 16.5% towards the 33% ultimate target - with new Forest sites occupying 4,421 hectares. This is now increasing at a rate of about 400 hectares each year. The new woodland sites contain more than 6 million trees, in mixed hardwood or hardwood/softwood mixes. The eventual aim is to increase woodland cover to some 30 million trees – the majority, c.80%, being broadleaved.

A Biodiversity Action Plan was produced for the Forest area in 1998 and its targets are being met and monitored. More than 1200ha of wildlife habitats have been created or brought into management. The majority of land planted or committed to the Forest provides new open public

access. In addition some 350 kilometres of new paths and tracks have been created or opened up. Promotional literature provides information about available walks, horse-riding facilities, cycle-routes and special facilities for those with disabilities.

It is estimated that there are 5 million visitors to the Forest each year. A £16 million National Forest Discovery Centre, known as CONKERS, has attracted over 1 million visitors in its four years of opening. This is another partnership venture and is sited in the very midst of the former coalfield and is the hub of its regeneration. A new Visitor Guide now boasts 50 attractions which are widely promoted. Some £50 million has been ‘won’ by partnerships involving the National Forest Company for Forest-related projects bringing much needed new investment and employment into the area. In former coalfield areas, once doomed to dereliction and the lowest grade commercial endeavour, leisure developments, new high quality business and housing are burgeoning.

On average it is estimated that some 12,000 people each year are directly involved in community activities including: tree-planting events; a Grow a Tree from Seed campaign; an Orchards campaign; conservation volunteer projects; village features; schools programmes and; arts projects.

THE MECHANISMS TO CREATE THE NATIONAL FOREST

It is not the idea that the NFC should ‘own’ the Forest. The NFC can, and does, own a few small sites (at present c.40ha in total), but not with a view to long-term ownership or to build up a large landholding. The NFC’s job is to involve others in the creation of the Forest. The NFC works with a whole range of partners: the Forestry Commission; local authorities; private mineral companies; major charities (like the Woodland Trust) and, commercial sponsors. Most importantly the NFC actively works with the landowners and farmers who own and manage the majority of the Forest.

LAND IN THE FOREST

The majority (74%) of the Forest is under agriculture. Statistics from ADAS (1992) show that the farming regime is varied with dairy being the predominant farm type. Land quality varies within the Forest: 54% is grade 3; 10% consists of both grades 2 and 4; 1% is grade 5 and; 26% is non agricultural comprising woodland (now c.16%), mineral extraction sites and urban land uses (The National Forest Strategy, 1994). Of the agricultural land, 59% is owner occupied and 41% is rented. This compares with a national (UK) average of 30% for rented land. Agricultural land values are high, recent sales of grade 3 land attracting prices of c.£7,900/hectare (£3,200/acre). The pressure for building land and the increase in horse paddocks act to maintain demand and price.

THE TENDER SCHEME

A key mechanism for woodland creation is The National Forest Tender Scheme (TS). Developed for the original Business Plan, this is unique to the Forest but has formed a model for many other similar schemes that operate in the UK. The TS is open to any landowner, or prospective landowner, who wants to create a part of the Forest on their land. All schemes have to include at least 50% new planting. Applicants are encouraged to incorporate new public access (access is encouraged but is not a prerequisite for success), recreation, nature conservation, cultural heritage and tourism related features. The woodland element must qualify for the Forestry Commission's English Woodland Grant Scheme. A bidding round for the TS is (subject to NFC Board approval) run each year. Schemes are judged by the Board of the Company on a series of well-publicised criteria such as how well they help fulfil the National Forest Strategy and their value for money.

The Interaction with Landowners

The TS has proved to be a winner, particularly with the private landowners and farmers. They feel that they retain control over their own land and business and, as they have that strong sense of ownership of their own scheme which they have devised in the

first place, are highly committed to managing it well and meeting the terms of their 30 year contract. Furthermore, familiarity with the TS and competition has ensured that the quality of the schemes has been improving over the years whilst the bid price remains keen. From applications received by the end of March, applicants are informed of the outcome of their application by mid July – so assisting the landowner to plan ahead.

If a TS application is successful, schemes are inspected regularly and payments made promptly – usually within a fortnight of the NFC receiving a claim. This clarity of finance helps establish a rapport and trust amongst landowners, their contractors/suppliers and the NFC.

Furthermore, the Scheme is proving an excellent mechanism for inspiring diversification not only of farmland but also of farm businesses. Beehive Farm, to take one example, has now converted from being a struggling small mixed dairy/arable farm to one solely focussed on forestry and leisure-related activities. The 27 hectares of woodland planting encompass three fishing lakes; full public access; a horse-riding route managed by paid permit; a surfaced path for wheelchair access, fishing jetties suitable for wheelchair use and; a car park.

To further diversify the farm the landowner has converted his redundant farm buildings into a tea room, rented craft and commercial units and the yard has become a miniature farm zoo. Much of the costs of diversification were funded by the capital arising from the TS. Many other farms have only taken out a proportion of their land for forestry but most have found some other way of supplementing their income from the woodland long before it reaches maturity.

Reluctant converts?

While public enthusiasm for the Forest was high, there were others, notably the farming community, (but also a significant number in the forestry profession), that were initially unconvinced. The NFC therefore needed to devise a financially attractive incentive and to reassure many people.

It soon became clear that as things stood it was simply not in the economic interest of farmers and landowners to convert farmland to woodland. A financial incentive was required that would be sufficiently attractive and flexible to bring about a change in attitude. The TS seemed to provide an answer but even then it took considerable time, indeed the first two, arguably three years, until the farming community added up the figures and started to consider the benefits of the scheme.

Despite the initial scepticism, criticism and uncertainty, the TS has proved popular. Many landowners have submitted a number of schemes and the “Tender Scheme” is commonplace in the lexicon of landowners. Prices for winning schemes have ranged from £7,000/ha to £9,650/ha. That is the nature of a scheme that tests competitive market forces. What the TS has achieved is the bringing forward of sizeable areas of land for Forest uses at a rate previously thought impossible. It has done this in a manner that has also provided, without compulsion, multiple public benefits including substantial public access and nature conservation. The TS has been praised by Lord Haskins (The Governments Rural Recovery Co-ordinator, 2003) and has attracted interest for its applicability to other land uses – such as the restoration of derelict ex-coalfield land in the Welsh Valleys, the fertile hills of South West of England and upland heaths.

Why the Tender Scheme Appeals

There are a number of reasons why the TS appeals to landowners. Firstly the money adds up. Secondly the landowner retains ownership of the land and there are no charges on the land. Thirdly, landowners can design schemes that meet their own needs. Fourthly, the scheme is flexible to allow and encourage new business opportunities. The TS also allows uniqueness and eccentricity. There are also the inherent benefits of forestry. Commonly cited reasons for the conversion of land include: the ability to use woodlands to allow the farm to focus on the better farmland and farm activities; the creation of a resource which will, in time be commercially valuable; using the released capital as part of a pension plan; and reducing work.

Encouraging landowners to turn agricultural land into woodland does involve a significant change in their knowledge. Educating and training farmers on forestry matters is therefore important. The NFC has an ongoing programme of seminars focusing on specific topics. These are often combined with mini-tours of forest sites. Not only does this combine technical knowledge with experienced reality but it exploits the innate curiosity of landowners to “see what and how” their neighbours are doing. The Tender Scheme Club, to which all TS owners can attend, holds two meetings a year to consider items of interest and see what fellow woodland winners are doing. The NFC also produces bespoke literature on relevant topics as required by TS winners. To date the publication on “How to Create a Farm Woodland” has been popular in and outside the Forest - over 6,000 copies have been produced and it is also available from the NFC website.

LAND ACQUISITION

The NFC also buys land. This is something the NFC does nearly always in partnership such as with the landholding agency of the Forestry Commission, Forest Enterprise. This not only achieves land conversion but it also is an excellent means of drawing in sponsorship money. For example, Jaguar Cars contributed substantially to the joint purchase and development by the NFC and the Forestry Commission of an 82 hectare site which now includes the country’s single largest walnut plantation. Jaguar really liked this connection with its famous walnut veneer dashboards and interiors. The woodland will not only give great pleasure but it will also be the base for research into the commercial growing of walnut in the UK. Other corporate sponsors include the Royal Society of Arts, Rolls Royce, Severn Trent Water, Felix Dennis (Publishing) and a myriad of regional firms.

PLANNING GAIN

The Forest Strategy recognises the importance of achieving urban forestry in towns. This will enhance the environment in terms of landscaping, air quality, shade and general health; create a

greener setting to attract inward investment; help the towns' tourism appeal; and provide new sites for recreation, education use and community involvement.

The largest town in the Forest, Burton upon Trent, has developed an Urban Forestry Strategy and is now proudly proclaiming itself as being "The Capital of The National Forest". Even the local paper has joined in by creating its own eponymous "Burton Mail" Centenary Woodland. This links to nearby local authority woodlands funded through the Tender Scheme, the incorporation of woodland planting in planning briefs for new housing, landscaping of business frontages and Free Tree Schemes for garden trees.

In another industrial town, Swadlincote, a huge new 60 hectare urban Forest Park has been created on a former colliery spoil tip. Where once there was a dreary and windswept man-made hill near the edge of town there is now a young woodland, full of imaginative, people-friendly features. The planning gain from the new housing development on the edge of the Park is and will be spent on maintaining the Park for the benefit of all.

New development of all kinds benefits greatly from its location in The National Forest. It seems only right, therefore that the planning gain from such development should be channelled into new planting. All six local authorities in the Forest have incorporated NFC designed planting guidelines into their planning policies. However, putting them into practice is far from consistent. Nonetheless since 1995, 117 hectares have been gained through such means. The NFC has produced a Guide for Planners and Developers with a number of case studies to show how it can be done.

OTHER MECHANISMS

No-one has exclusive rights on good ideas. When others want to do things the NFC tries to be as helpful as it can. For example, in the early 1990's the NFC was approached about the siting of the National Memorial Arboretum – commemorating those who suffered in the World Wars of the last century - in what was then a very new National Forest. The NFC thought it was a great idea and helped them find a site which a private aggregate

company subsequently donated and then to generally to get things underway. Likewise, Sarah's Wood, named after a young girl with cerebral palsy, was the brainchild of Scope – a national charity. The NFC assisted with the fundraising and bringing in the County Council who planted and manage the woodland, which has been particularly designed for those with disabilities.

MECHANISMS COMPARED

It is expected that in the next 5 years the importance of the TS as the leading contributing mechanism to the creation of the Forest will continue. The restoration of mineral and derelict land gives rise to fluctuating levels of planting land. Land acquisition is fund limited and subject to finding suitable partners. Local authority land available for planting is diminishing as the existing land stocks are used up and woodland created through building development is variable and closely associated with planning issues. Initiatives can result in significant areas of land for planting, but they currently tend to result in "one off" releases of land.

THE FOREST PHILOSOPHY

As the Forest grows, so its challenges increase. While there is still a strong emphasis on new woodland creation, the development of markets for wood products is an increasingly important component of the Forest work. Indeed, this is becoming a pressing priority- some of the earlier woodlands have already been thinned and landowners need to be able to see that their new woodlands can provide a future crop. To ensure that proper woodland management is undertaken, be it for commercial or amenity purposes, a market is required for wood products. Currently this market will be for the relatively low-grade timber arising from thinnings and general wood management. Effort has therefore been concentrated on the development of local markets, notably the stimulation of wood fuel (there are now 5 wood fuel installations in the forest- 3 years ago there were none), log suppliers (in an area where most houses have chimneys and a culture of using fires this an increasing market) and raising the level

of business skills in the woodland sector to create and maximises these commercial activities. The NFC has secured £235,000 from East Midlands Development Agency (Emda) to assist this process.

It should not be forgotten that the Forest is also a hearts and minds exercise. The NFC must keep the faith of and with local people. They are experiencing a massive change to their familiar surroundings. That change is undoubtedly better in the case in the former coalfield where once closed mines resulted in social despondency and waste landscapes. But there are other changes too- as the area receives more visitors, mainly by motor car, so the need for suitable infrastructure increases. The NFC therefore depends upon continuing goodwill and support.

The NFC must continue to satisfy its political masters that the Forest can, and does, contribute directly to their targets. The NFC must also continue to engage and convince them as to the NFC's relevance- for without the NFC the Forest would not happen. To this end, continuing to deliver is the main way to Ministerial hearts, minds and budgets. Media coverage about the Forest, in all forms - newspapers, TV and radio, is up-beat, positive and topical. Visits to the Forest are frequent and invaluable- it is only when people see the Forest with their own eyes that they can capture the essence and excitement.

So, after just over a decade, is the hard work done and the Forest complete? Certainly not - the creation of the Forest takes time and it is only at the early stages of that process. Indeed, more woodland is needed - for when all is said and done, people expect a Forest to have trees! More new woodland is therefore essential. The farmer therefore remains fundamental to the ultimate success, or not, of the Forest. In the Forest the innate inventiveness of landowners and the flexibility of woodland to deliver "more than trees" offers one blueprint of successful and sustainable woodlands.

It is therefore essential that landowners, communities, companies and political decision makers continue to support the Forest and help create something that is inspirational, enduring and sustainable.

REFERENCES

- ADAS (1992). National Forest Agricultural Research Study, ADAS Business Management Services.
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Table 1. Land committed to The National Forest by the Tender Scheme and other mechanisms (hectares).

	1995/ 96	1996/ 97	1997/ 98	1998/ 99	1999/ 2000	2000/ 01	2001/ 02	2002/ 03	2003/ 04	2004/ 05	2005/ 06
Tender Scheme	144	318	212	246	242	290	417	360	299	298	227
Mineral/Derelict Land Restoration	25	69	113	98	91	59	25	25	58	40	43
Land Acquisition	10	15	55	20	94	96	93	46	49	42	118
Development Related	6	23	1	3	13	13	7	12	15	10	14
Local Authorities	23	10	5	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
National Forest Premium	-	-	-	-	25	30	19	15	1	-	-
Other Initiatives	32	66	21	3	13	14	14	44	28	4	11
Total hectares	240	501	407	370	480	502	575	502	450	394	413

Note: Land committed to The National Forest during the Development Team phase (1991-95), accounts for c.600ha.