

The Independent Panel on Forestry

Ramblers response to “Call for Views”

Question 1 – What do forests and woods mean to you?

A walk in the woods is one of life's simple pleasures.

Indeed, the Ramblers believes that the public have an affinity to our forests and woods. This comes from a deep sense of cultural identity; they are integral to our inherited beliefs and values and give us so much more than planks of timber.

It is time to put to bed once and for all the idea that they are commodities contained on balance sheets to be sold at times of need, and reaffirm them as part of our nation's identity; to be nurtured and passed on to the next generation.

Public access to all forests and woods must be extended and enhanced. All recommendations the panel make need to have a heart of access as well as a heart of oak.

Question 2 – What is your vision for the future of England's forests and woods?

As the Secretary of State made clear to the House of Commons when announcing the establishment of the Independent Panel, it must look at increasing public access:

“It is important that the panel looks at all forms of access, including access for walkers, riders and cyclists,” and “We want to expand access to our forests and woodlands because it is in everyone's interests that we do so.”

At present the 18% of woodlands in the Public Forest Estate account for 44% of accessible woodlands in Englandⁱ. This leaves large swathes of our woodland without open public access. Some of these may have Public Rights of Way or allow de-facto local access, but most do not and are unwelcoming and closed to the public.

The National Ecosystem Assessment⁺ has shown the economic and social benefits of people being able to access and enjoy the countryside. The Assessment puts these benefits . in monetary terms of social and environmental benefits . at £1.2 billion per annum, and recreational visits at £484 million per annum. The 2009 Forestry Commission Working Group Reportⁱⁱ points out the benefits to health, well-being, local economic development and education that only happen with public access. Without public access, a wood is just trees.

The Ramblers agrees with the 2009 report when it suggests using the Public Forest Estate to promote access in different ways:

- ~ through re-positioning the PFE closer to where people live and work;
- ~ making the current estate more effective in promoting access;
- ~ the PFE helping to generate improvements in access to all woodland across England, for example, by demonstrating how to manage access in woods with high biodiversity value.

Taking this last finding forward, the Ramblers believes that a large number of the 82% of forests and woods in private ownership should allow some form of public access.

Increasing access to all woods would bring many social benefits and its negative effects would be negligible. Forestry Commission examples show that open access is compatible with existing commercial timber management and with woods primarily set aside for habitats and biodiversity. In Scotland, it has also been shown that widespread ~~by right~~ public access live side by side with commercial forestry and other woodland management, such as recreational countryside sport.

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gave the people of Scotland public rights to cross and be on land for recreational purposes, so long as this access is exercised responsibly. This right of access includes woodland. A Scottish Outdoor Access Code was produced to reinforce the need for responsible access and educate the public and land managers accordingly.

The Scottish approach is largely underpinned by a philosophy of enabling rather than enforcement of access rights and follows a Scandinavian-style ~~allenmannsrett~~ ~~qor~~ ~~%~~ every person's right with civic responsibility rather than regulation at its core.

The right of access in Scotland has enjoyed a trouble free introduction,ⁱⁱⁱ with no access problems having been reported in the 25% of Scotland which is under woodland. It should also be noted that with Scotland producing a timber supply of about 8.5 million m³ each year ^{iv} no one can claim timber production and open access cannot live side by side.

We believe that it's time to trust the people of England just as the people of Scotland have been trusted to enjoy their birthright responsibly. The ~~by right~~ open access to all woodland in Scotland should be taken as a model for England.

Question 3 – What do you feel to be the benefits of forests and woods to:

a) you personally;

The Ramblers is a membership-led charity and believes individuals are best placed to answer question 3a in their own capacity, we have encouraged members to submit their thoughts separately.

b) society as a whole;

The woods within the Public Forest Estate are increasingly playing a major role in countryside recreation with the public making over 40 million visits a year. The 2009 Report showed that the recent significant increase in major leisure infrastructure within the Public Forest Estate had largely been financed by outside funding; (90% from non-central Government sources), and this generated gross income. It also found visitors overwhelmingly approved of these services and that they provided local and regional economic benefits.

However, the benefits to society of forests and woods goes beyond the Public Forest Estate . The recent Natural Environment White Paper and 2009 Read Report signalling a major increase in woodland cover, maximising non-forestry sector benefits need to be planned in.

The National Ecosystem Assessment clearly shows the social benefits of woodland to be very high. Increasing these benefits needs to be an integral part of all afforestation proposals with full public access being the gateway to releasing these people orientated benefits.

Alongside people orientated benefits one of most far reaching social benefits increasing woodland cover can bring is its part in the mitigation of climate change via carbon capture. At the same time as believing a reduction in the amount of CO₂ produced is the primary goal for any climate strategy, the Ramblers would like to see an increase in CO₂ capture via afforestation. For this to be most effective, the Ramblers believes a mixed planting of hardwood and pine, such as Sitka spruce and other high carbon removing trees, will be needed.

However, such an afforestation program will need to be balanced and bring about the conditions for other social benefits, such as public access and personal well-being, as well habitat and wildlife benefits alongside increased localised wood product production and timber supply.

c) the natural environment; and

The National Ecosystem Assessment put the landscape value of woodland at an estimated £185 million per annum, which given that the U.K. has a woodland cover of just 12%, the second-least wooded country in Europe, shows how important it is to our environment. It also presents the opportunity to increase these benefits by way of an overall increase in woodland cover.

The Ramblers supports both Government targets and non-public bodies advocating an increase to woodland cover and wishes to see an increase in the range and coverage of native tree species in England.

However, some bodies have also put forward the position that because the Public Forest Estate (similar to most private commercial woods), is largely made up of non-native pine varieties, it is inherently bad for the natural environment and that large scale reforestation of the Public Forest Estate with native species should take place.

This does not sit with the findings of the 2009 report that found that the Forestry Commission has undertaken large scale changes to its estate already and that it has one of best records of anybody in its management of Sites of Special Scientific Interest:

- Between 2002 and 2009 there was a 12% increase in the area of plantation that had been restored to semi-natural woodland, 15,952 ha to 17,842 ha.
- During 2004 to 2009, Native Woodland Habitat Action Plan habitats on the Estate have increased from 24,815 ha to 27,224 ha. These habitats now represent over 10% of the total area of the PFE and UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority open habitats have also increased by 10% since 2004.
- The PFE includes 67,772 ha of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Those classified as being in target condition rose from 71% in 2003 to 98% by 2009.

It should also be noted that 45% of the Public Forest Estate is found within the borders of National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (80,000 ha within National Parks, 35,000 ha within AONBs), making their woods part of our most prized areas of the English landscape. Many of the trees within these areas, held in high regard for their landscape beauty, are non-native . such as beech and sweet chestnut. A radical change of woodland cover within these areas would change their overall character and should only be done on a landscape based approach and not in isolation from that landscape.

The Ramblers believes that the work the Forestry Commission does should be allowed to continue as planned with it being allowed to work towards an outcome of mixed benefits including commercial forestry (see the Ramblers answer to Question 5 for our position on the need for a Public Forest Estate). As such, we do not share the view of others that the Forestry Commission needs a radical change in management and scope.

Instead of a total change from mixed native and pine woodland to one of only native species, the Ramblers are in favour of the approach put forward by the Worldwide Fund for Nature in its new generation plantations project which puts forward the position that plantations can be realigned to bring lasting wide-ranging benefits . including ecosystem integrity, conservation and sustainable forest communities.^v

d) The economy?

The Ramblers also believes that increased access is compatible with commercial forestry. In Scotland there is no evidence that open access has altered the commercial management of forests. In England, Forestry Commission woods provide 60% (1.4 million tonnes) of all softwood production at the same time as allowing open public access.

If it's possible in Scotland and for the Public Forest Estate then it's possible for the vast majority of the other 82% of forestry land in England in private hands. Please see our answer to question 5 for our comments on the need for a Public Forest Estate, which includes commercial forestry.

Question 4 – We would like to hear about your suggestions of practical solutions and good practice which can be replicated more widely.

The Ramblers calls for a right of access to all woodland

All woodland should be made public access land by way of a change to the definition of open country in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act to include woodland. This would also include the accompanying restrictions system, allowing outline directions for exclusion of the public from areas being felled or worked on the days needed, as well as exclusions for nature conservation or other reasons. Owners will not be subject to new burdens or costs as a result of this change, as open access do not imply that the owner has to improve the facility or the ease of access for users. It's very much ~~a~~ access as you find itq but with most planted woodland including wide forest tracks, paths with gates and other access points this would not normally be a problem. Landowners will also benefit, as the land will be subject to reduced liability.

Such a change in the law and the updating of the conclusive maps of open country, (already planned for under the Act but currently delayed by Defra) will take time. As an intermediate measure there should be a requirement that all woods receiving government grant or other public monies - be that via the English Woodland Grant Scheme, creation of the National Forest or others . such as woods included in Stewardship Schemes - should be dedicated as access land as a condition of receiving these grants and entering into such agreements. The simple rule should be applied: if public money is used then the widest public benefit should be gained, and for woodlands this should include public access.

Question 5 –What do you see as the priorities and challenges for policy about England's forests and woods?

The Ramblers believes that we need a Public Forest Estate which is able to continue to deliver the wide range of benefits it currently provides and to form the catalyst to expand these benefits wider.

The Ramblers is not aware of any other model which will be able to achieve this. The estate is the largest single provider of outdoor recreational opportunities and provides some of the best examples of welcoming, well-managed public access in England, which any private landowner or charity would be hard pressed to match, it must remain of a size and a scope to continue its outstanding contribution to public access and social wellbeing.

The Public Forest Estate provides such high quality promoted access that a staggering 40 million visits a year are currently made to it.

It is not just a right of open access the Forestry Commission provides, it is an unparalleled ease of access. This level of access goes well beyond the basic level of open access that we are calling for and includes widespread multi-use access promotion. The way the Forestry Commission goes about access is so unique and important to so many people and local communities that it must continue.

The range of benefits and roles that woodland can provide fits well with the current attitude of multi-use pursued by the Forestry Commission. This multi-use approach will still be needed if wider open access to woodland is provided under CROW. It gives the public a certainty of access as well as the feeling that they are being welcomed to enjoy it.

However, it will only be possible with a public estate of a size able to provide cross-subsidy from its more profitable aspects of timber production or high value leisure facilities. It is these which enable the Forestry Commission to provide and promote the local access for a wide range of users currently on offer in a vast majority of its woods. To deliver this wide ranging remit the running of the estate needs to be able to plan long term and be at an arms length from the sometimes shorter term policy drivers within Government.

The Ramblers also believes that with the level of Government contribution to the overall income of the Forestry Commission falling, from 36% in 2003/2004 to a forecasted 14% in 2010/2011, that in time the Public Forest Estate can become self supporting; especially if it is allowed greater financial freedom.

This can be achieved without the need for the continuation of asset sales to balance budgets, currently up to 14% from just 4% of the budget in 2003/2004 or the selling of public woods as part of cuts to public services and as part of the spending review.

Justin Cooke

Senior Policy Officer, The Ramblers

justinc@ramblers.org.uk

ⁱ <http://gabrielhemery.com/2011/01/08/public-forest-estate-what-benefits/>

ⁱⁱ The long-term role of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England: Working group report May 2010:

<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/rural/forestry/documents/forestry-panel-paper-2-4.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/rae/documents/Inquiryplanningsheet.pdf>

^{iv} [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/SFS2006cfc101.pdf/\\$FILE/SFS2006cfc101.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/SFS2006cfc101.pdf/$FILE/SFS2006cfc101.pdf)

^v http://newgenerationplantations.com/pdf/NGPP_Synthesis_Report09.pdf