



The Forest Access User Group – Views for the Independent Panel on Forestry

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

The Forest Access User Group believes that public access to our forests and woods must be at the heart of the Independent Panels decisions and recommendations on the future of forestry.

Forests play an essential part of open air recreation, including walking, rock climbing, orienteering, horse riding, carriage driving, dog walking and off road cycling. For example an estimated 30% of all UK off road cycling takes place in public forests (with private woods providing less than 1% of woodland cycle access), and over 70 individual climbing crags are situated within the Forestry Commission Estate with many more situated on privately owned woodlands. They are particularly important for walkers with dogs, as Forestry Commission surveys indicate they are the single biggest, year-round visitor to their sites; on average dogs accompany people on 48% of all visits to the countryside¹.

The Forest Access User Group believes the Independent Panel must formulate long-term policy for all of our forests and woods which protect, maintain and increase all access by right, ensuring these areas are enjoyed tomorrow and for generations to come.

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

The Forest Access User Group believes our forests and woods should be accessible, healthy, well-managed and well-balanced landscapes delivering multiple public benefits

The Public Forest Estate is ideally placed to provide public access for everyone and be an exemplar of best practice. The overarching vision for the Public Forest Estate and for our private forests and woods is clearly outlined in the 2008-2012 delivery plan for England’s Trees, Woods and Forests which calls for, innovative partnership projects and joint ventures that extend the range of opportunities for both informal and more active sport and recreation in both public and private woodland and that Forestry Commission’s role as a provider of high-quality recreation and sporting experiences should be extended, to a wide audience for the benefit of their health, wellbeing and personal development²

Currently, the Public Forest Estate makes up only 18% of England’s woodland and forests but accounts for 44% of our accessible woodlands producing an imbalance between those public and private woods which allow access. For example horse riders and cyclists have access to only 22% of public rights of way, and horse-drawn vehicle drivers to only 5% so the permissive access they enjoy in our forests is of immense importance.

¹ TNS Research International (2010b) Monitor of engagement with the natural environment: The national survey on people and the natural environment, annual report from the 2009-10 survey. Natural England, Sheffield

² [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-etwf-delivery-plan.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-etwf-delivery-plan.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-etwf-delivery-plan.pdf/$FILE/eng-etwf-delivery-plan.pdf)

This is especially so as many of the equestrian rights of way are now disconnected from each other; the roads that should connect them are no longer safe to use because of the speed, volume and size of motorised traffic on them, leaving many equestrians without a safe local route to use.

The off-lead access allowed on the Public Forest Estate for dog owners is the single most important amenity for dog owners in England³ and is one of the few locations which allow dogs to exhibit their natural behaviour, which owners have a duty to permit under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

Forests are the spiritual home to many sports including orienteering, climbing and off road cycling and we call upon the members of the Panel to recognise the benefits in terms of health and education, and the contribution made to the rural economy through the continued staging of sporting and recreational events in woodlands and forests, whether publically or privately owned. Without access to the Public Forest Estate, the British Siberian Husky Racing Association considers it will be probably be impossible to maintain their sport in England which is almost entirely dependent on permissive access to Forestry Commission land.

The opportunity therefore exists with this process to consider a broad vision for greater access to all England's forests and woods and it is essential that the breadth of recreational opportunities they provide is fully understood as future policy is developed with visitors wishing to explore the unique, natural features the wooded environment provides.

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

a) You personally;

The Forest Access User Group represents over 8 million people from the following organisations The British Horse Society, British Mountaineering Council, Open Spaces Society, the Ramblers, Sport and Recreation Alliance, CTC, IMBA, British Orienteering and The Kennel Club.

Overall, our membership feels that forests and woods are a source of physical and emotional well-being, bringing multiple benefits to people, wildlife and the environment, and each organisation has asked its members to respond to the panel with their individual views.

b) Society as a whole;

Woodlands provide many recreational opportunities to thousands of people, helping to improve physical, mental and emotional health, and general wellbeing . they are the ultimate facility from which to channel these benefits.

The Public Forest Estate has increased its leisure and recreational infrastructure over the last few years to meet, and stimulate, a growing demand for outdoor recreation but more work should be carried out to increase the number of people able to experience forest and woods by making them more accessible.

c) The natural environment; and

Our woods and forests have a vital role to play as part of a coherent ecological network. Their importance is clearly outlined in chapter 8 of the National Ecosystem Assessment⁴ which details a quarter of all UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority species that are associated with trees and woods. With 45% of the Public Forest Estate to be found within the borders of National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, many form part of our most prized areas of the English landscape.

³ Sport Industry Research Centre (2008) Assessment of perceptions, behaviours and understanding of walkers with dogs in the countryside. SIRC, Sheffield

The public's desire to protect our forests and woodlands mean there is the potential for extending the educational role to wider issues relating to the natural environment. Members of The Forest Access User Group have a vested interest in protecting the natural environment and encouraging its regeneration to ensure they can continue to enjoy its unique qualities.

d) The economy?

The National Ecosystem Assessment has shown the economic and social benefits of people being able to access and enjoy the countryside. The Assessment puts the benefits of recreational visits at £484 million per annum.⁴

Recreational and sporting access to woodland plays a large part in contributing to these benefits with large-scale activities such as motor sports generating significant income. For example, research carried out by Sheffield Hallam University in 2010 suggests that a typical forest stage rally contributes up to £2 million to the economy, with a significant portion of this going directly into the local economy in the surrounding countryside. Smaller scale spend also occurs with individuals such as Cyclists who, on average, spend £13.43 locally per day visit.⁵

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

The Public Forest Estate should continue to maximise public benefits by implementing recommendations from the working group looking at its long term role. This requires a gradual shift to create more accessible woodland, alongside the creation of exceptional forests, for the promotion of sport and recreation opportunities.

In Scotland, The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gives everyone statutory access rights to most land. Ideally the same approach should be applied to our forests and woods in England.

Good examples of woodland providing access opportunities are widely available, such as the Forestry Commission's network of cycle centres and cycle trails for families and mountain bikers at locations such as Kielder, Dalby, Alice Holt, Thetford, Cannock and the Forest of Dean, which taken together with none Forestry Commission locations such as Swinley Forest and Viceroy Wood at Penshurst, provide excellent models for future developments. Good examples of Forestry Commission woods providing equestrian access are Kershope Horse⁶ and the Harcombe Riding Trails

There are Forestry Commission-approved management plans for woodland on two sites which are owned and managed by the British Mountaineering Council. The aim of these is primarily to manage the woodland to protect the cliff environment and to regenerate the health of the woodland to support more fauna and flora, whilst at the same time allowing people freely to access these areas. A similar model could easily be used in other private woodland sites.

However, much of this access outlined above is permissive. It is essential that current levels of access and amenity are maintained and enhanced across all of our woods and forests and therefore the Forest Access User Group believes Section 16 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 should be used to dedicate access for equestrians and cyclists in the Public Forest Estate.

⁴ Chapter 8, Woodlands <http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/Resources/tabid/82/Default.aspx>

⁵ Forestry Commission. Economics & Statistics Section (2006). Valuing Forest Recreation Activities (Christie M)

⁶ <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/ourwoods.nsf/LUWebDocsByKey/EnglandNorthumberlandKielderKielderCuddysHallpicnicplaceKershopeHorse>

The Forestry Commission currently estimate that over 163,000 hectares of its estate has open, permit free, access for horse riders . this is permissive access and needs protecting for future generations. Dedication should also be encouraged in private woodland to help increase recreational opportunities while allowing landowners the freedom to manage their estate.

There are around 10,000km of trails open to cyclists within the English Forestry Commission woodlands; the vast majority are open by permission only with no guaranteed future access.

The Forestry Commission has already dedicated all of its freehold estate as open access land (as well as the BMC with its own landholdings) which guarantees access on foot. If similar dedications were made for equestrians and cyclists it would ensure public access in perpetuity. [4]

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

Both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State⁷ have said they want to improve access to our forests and this opportunity must be taken. The Independent Panel should set out proposals to maximise the benefits of the Public Forest Estate while seeking to encourage landowners of private holdings to increase access opportunities.

The overwhelming opposition at the start of the year to the proposed sale of the public forest estate shows how highly people value green space for outdoor recreation; the Public Forest Estate is a cherished national asset that needs to be protected for public access in all forms, be it on foot, bike, horseback, horse-drawn carriage or with a dog. Woods and forests must continue to bring clear physical and mental benefits to the public by remaining fully accessible which in turn will help to strengthen the public’s understanding of the natural environment.

Recent reports including the National Ecosystem Assessment, and the Lawton Review, which looked into how to develop a coherent ecological network for both people and nature, have made strong recommendations on the value and restoration of nature and, in detail, of our forests and woods. Policies should be developed which encourage more woodland planting and commit to protecting and restoring ancient woodland, and we ask that the Panel look ~~to~~ provide advice on the options for ensuring everyone has the opportunity to experience and enjoy our woodland resource. In particular, the ways in which national policy and appropriate delivery mechanisms can safeguard and improve access alongside biodiversity targets across public and privately owned woodland and forests.

The Independent Panel should recommend ways for our forests and woodlands to play a greater role in tackling the biggest issues of the day including public health and the economy . access is the clear mechanism to tackle these issues.

The Forest Access User Group is:

The British Horse Society
British Siberian Husky Racing Association
CTC - Cyclists' Touring Club
IMBA - International Mountain Biking Association
Ramblers

British Mountaineering Council
British Orienteering
The Kennel Club
Open Spaces Society
The Sport and Recreation Alliance

⁷ ~~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.+House of Commons 17 Feb 2011 : Column 1169 ~~–~~ we should be making sure that, whatever happens, we increase access to our forests~~–~~ qDavid Cameron (16 February 2011)