

EDITORIAL

Forestry - serving the nation?

“These are strange queer times”, accompanied by a worried shake of the head, is a refrain I hear ever more frequently while visiting an engineer situated at the edge of a forest in Co Laois. And indeed he is right. Events throughout the last year appear to squeeze the country’s economy ever more tightly in a cold, clammy embrace, and to such an extent as to provoke discussions of sovereignty as the angels of international financial doom flock to our shores.

As ever, the long-term nature of forestry brings to mind the importance of stability of investments. The current economic crisis can teach us to recognise the importance of good and strategic management, with an eye to the future, but without forgetting the obligations of the present. We are placing increasing numbers of demands on our forests, or perhaps to see the glass half-full, our forests are already providing us with many more services than some of our forbearers might have imagined (though having read the Trees, Woods and Literature article one realises that some had quite a clear view of the future possibilities).

Quite aside from the significant economic value of an industry we have relatively recently developed from scratch, there are social, cultural and recreational values, as well as watershed and landscape management, carbon sequestration and biodiversity protection. It is timely that we present here the Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the European Forest Institute, which took place in Dublin Castle in September 2009, whose theme was forest ecosystem management in the 21st century. All of the above themes are discussed in some detail, and the content fits well with the preceding three papers – indeed there is quite a degree of cross-over between many of the papers and articles in this issue.

Problems looming on the horizon for the forestry sector as a whole include the unevenness of the age-class distribution of our national estate. This will have serious consequences for the timber and wood processing industry across the board, not to mention environmentally as pointed out by Black et al. and Byrne herein.

Another significant difficulty is one of public perception. For an entire society to realise the true value of their own forest and woodland resource, there needs to be a respect and understanding of the benefits to be derived. Even still, even after campaigns such as the NeighbourWood Scheme (described by Collins), there is a singular lack of appreciation of what our silvic heritage is (warts and all), and what it can and may be. Magners new book (*Stopping by Woods*), reviewed here, will surely contribute to the cause.

Of course this shortcoming has been a product of our history; however, we too must accept some responsibility. As the professionals it falls first to us to be the drivers and to start from the bottom. If we want the country to ever draw close to possessing a knowledge-based economy, we should acknowledge that it will not happen while the majority of our national-school children cannot name the trees outside their own

homes. Drawing the circle wider still, I wonder how many on the streets realise the new importance wood products have taken on due to their roles in energy production, low cost provision and carbon storage? Hendrick points out that roundwood demand has never been higher, despite the current deflationary circumstances.

Increased public awareness and appreciation of these and other aspects of forestry would help in securing and maintaining investment, to ensure afforestation rates do not dwindle beyond a point which the industry, and the entire nation, would regret deeply.