Forest recreation in Ireland: a close-up of the NeighbourWood Scheme and Sculpture in Woodland

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Abstract

Recent years have seen an increased focus on the role of Ireland's woodlands and forests as a recreational resource. Numerous initiatives have emerged, including the Forest Service NeighbourWood Scheme and Sculpture in Woodland. The NeighbourWood Scheme provides funding for the development of 'close-to-home' woodland amenities for regular use by local people, through partnerships involving local authorities and communities. Numerous critical success factors underpinning successful projects are identified and explored, as they will have relevance to similar projects elsewhere. Sculpture in Woodland in Devil's Glen, Co Wicklow, is an example of a project that received support under the NeighbourWood Scheme. This project represents a partnership between foresters and artists in the development of a sculpture collection in the forest. An overview of the development of the project, and the opportunities and challenges experienced, will be of relevance to similar projects involving foresters and other groups focused on enhancing the recreational use of Irish forests.

Introduction

In August 2008, the author was invited to present a paper on forest recreation in Ireland at the 73rd Annual Meeting of the Icelandic Forestry Association, held in Ísafjörður in the northwest of the country. The Icelandic Forestry Association (Skógræktarfélag Íslands), founded in 1930, represents a nationwide alliance of over 60 local and regional forestry societies, the objective of which is to promote tree planting, forestry and nature conservation. The Association is a non-governmental organisation and has a membership of approximately 7,500. The meeting in Ísafjörður was attended by over 200 delegates from various forestry societies around the country.

Of particular interest to the Association was the development of Ireland's NeighbourWood Scheme, in particular, the critical success factors underlining successful projects. In recent years, the Association has become increasingly involved in community-based projects, as its focus moves from rural afforestation to the creation of forests in and around expanding urban centres, primarily for recreation and other multi-benefit objectives. Members were also eager to learn about the Sculpture in Woodland project in Ashford, Co Wicklow, which the Association visited during its tour of Ireland in 2003. The structure, funding and commissioning process were of particular relevance, given early plans emerging for a similar woodland sculpture project near Reykjavík.

While originally aimed primarily at the Icelandic forester, the following paper, compiled in 2008, is also of relevance to the Irish reader. It gathers together a wide range of experience gained over a number of years under the Forest Service NeighbourWood Scheme, particularly in relation to key success factors invariably

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associated with successful projects. By studying the Sculpture in Woodland project, it also tracks the development of a cooperative initiative between foresters and artists, setting out the opportunities and challenges faced along the way. The lessons learnt will have a wider application beyond both initiatives, as the focus on the multi-benefit nature of Irish woodlands and forests continues to grow.

The NeighbourWood Scheme

Funding 'close-to-home' woodland amenities

The Forest Service NeighbourWood Scheme is a financial package aimed at encouraging 'close-to-home' woodland amenities in Ireland. These woodlands are developed and managed in partnership with the local community, and provide local people with an easily accessible public resource to be visited and enjoyed as part of their daily or weekly routine. Neighbourwoods are designed to cater for a wide range of general activities – walking, family visits and picnics, wildlife watching, jogging and fitness training – and also for use by local schools as an 'outdoor classroom', for young people to learn about nature and the environment. Neighbourwoods can be located in and around towns and cities, or can be more rural in nature, situated near a village or in the countryside.

Although once predominantly rural in nature, Ireland's society has become rapidly urbanised, and towns and cities have expanded greatly, particularly over the last two decades. These trends have the same impact on people's lives in Ireland as they do elsewhere: lifestyles that are more stressful, unhealthy and resource-rich but time-poor, an increase in obesity and heart disease, and a general distancing from nature and the outdoors. Thankfully, recent years have seen a renewed increase in the recreational value of the Irish countryside, with organisations such as Comhairle na Tuaithe, Coillte, the National Trails Office and Leave No Trace having a major positive impact. However, the Forest Service NeighbourWood Scheme is focused specifically on developing closer to home woodland amenities that provide a sense of nature and the outdoors, all within walking distance from where people live.

The NeighbourWood Scheme is implemented by the Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and is funded nationally under Ireland's National Development Plan 2007-2013. The scheme has its origins back in the early and mid 1990s, in three former grant packages: the Planned Recreational Forestry Scheme, the Amenity Woodland Scheme and the Urban Woodland Scheme. The NeighbourWood Scheme itself was first launched in 2001. A major revision was undertaken in 2007, based on extensive consultation with users and aimed at expanding the scheme's application and streamlining its procedures. The revised scheme was relaunched in December 2007, and a new scheme manual published in April 2008.

Criteria, funding elements and application procedure

The NeighbourWood Scheme is aimed primarily at local authorities. However, a recently introduced change is the opening up of the scheme to private woodland owners who may wish to develop their woodland for recreational use by local people. In all cases, various criteria have to be fulfilled. For example, there must be a clear potential

for the development of attractive amenity woodland that will be strategically located, easily accessible, and well-used by local people. Also, in every case, the project must be developed in partnership with the local community and (where relevant) specific recreational user groups.

Funding is available under three separate headings or 'elements':

- Element 1: NeighbourWood Enhancement funds the silvicultural enhancement of <u>existing</u> woodland, to improve its suitability and attractiveness for recreation. The maximum grant is \notin 5,000/ha, and eligible operations include general woodland restoration work, coupe planting, woodland edge management and the clearance of invasive species, such as rhododendron and laurel.
- Element 2: NeighbourWood Establishment funds the establishment of <u>new</u> woodland on open 'green field' sites, specifically for recreational use. The maximum grant is $\in 6,920/ha$, covering fencing, plants and planting, vegetation management and other related operations.
- Element 3: Recreational Facilities funds the installation and upgrade of recreational facilities within the woodland, including paths, seats, signage, nature trails and carparking. Facilities associated with a particular activity can also be supported, e.g. fitness training equipment, birdwatching hides, playground equipment. The grant paid under Element 3 is on a sliding scale: €4,500/ha for the first 10 ha, and €3,000/ha for subsequent hectares, up to a limit of 40 ha.



Figure 1: The NeighbourWood Scheme is aimed at developing 'close-to-home' woodland amenities for local people to access and enjoy on a regular basis. Belleek Wood, Ballina, Co Mayo.

Element 1 and 2 can include up to 30% open space, for paths, carparking, woodland glades, picnic areas, viewing points, etc.

The application procedure has been made as streamlined as possible. The applicant develops a NeighbourWood Plan with the local community, following a template contained in the scheme's manual and designed to keep people focused on the key considerations involved. The plan is then submitted to the Forest Service and is assessed by the relevant Forestry Inspector for the area involved. The Forest Service also consults with other statutory bodies, if there are issues surrounding designated sites, watercourses, sensitive landscapes, etc. If all is in order, approval is issued and the work can commence. Once completed, a second inspection is made to ensure that the work has been carried out to the required standards. At this stage, approximately 75% of the grant available under each relevant element is paid. The remaining 25% is paid as a second instalment four years later, following a further inspection to ensure that the woodland and associated facilities are being well maintained.

Critical success factors

The NeighbourWood Scheme has had many highs and lows since its launch in 2001. For example, at various points during the scheme's lifetime, funding issues limited the number of projects that could be approved. However, over 40 projects have received funding to date under the scheme, and taken together, these have given the Forest Service a wealth of experience regarding 'critical success factors' that can make the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful project. These factors are outlined below. While relating specifically to the NeighbourWood Scheme, these critical success factors may also be relevant to other types of projects and initiatives elsewhere, involving the creation of a woodland amenity with local input.

- Adopt a 'catchy' title: The use of the word 'NeighbourWood' in the scheme title helps to capture people's imagination and gets across the type of woodland amenity intended under the scheme. It conjures up associations with neighbourhoods, communities working together, and a friendly, welcoming amenity on people's doorstep. The word also helps grab the attention of the media as something that represents a new 'spin' on forest recreation.
- Adopt strict criteria: The NeighbourWood Scheme is underpinned by strict criteria regarding what is and what is not funded. For example, as mentioned above, there must be a clear potential for the development of attractive amenity woodland that will be strategically located, easily accessible, and well-used by local people. Also, in every case, the project must be developed in partnership with the local community and with specific recreational user groups. The Forest Service is keen to focus on quality over quantity, to promote the development of a smaller number of key, well-located and well-maintained amenities, as opposed to a high number of lower quality projects.
- Allow flexibility: Within the framework of clearly defined criteria, it is important to allow as much flexibility as possible in how the NeighbourWood Scheme is used. Every project is different, and a unique combination of local issues local 'players', local politics, site conditions, opportunities and

constraints, additional sources of funding, etc. – will apply. In effect, every project has its own character, and this has to be taken into account when assessing applications.

- Site suitability: The Forest Service requires that each site is fertile and capable of supporting healthy woodland development. This helps ensure quick growth and the rapid development of a healthy, vibrant woodland amenity for people to use and enjoy. Substandard sites entering the scheme invariably take a long time to establish, require repeated inputs in terms of replanting, look neglected, and simply do not satisfy the expectation of local people. Occasionally, altered sites such as former landfills are submitted for consideration. In these cases, the Forest Service requires a soil analysis to be carried out, to ensure that compaction, poor substrate quality, possible contaminants, etc. do not pose a risk to woodland development.
- Strong community input: It is vital that local people are involved as partners in the project, to ensure the development of an amenity tailored to local needs and preferences. It also encourages ownership and pride in the project, and a sense of involvement and interaction that can have wider benefits within the community. Local ownership also reduces vandalism and other forms of damage, through the involvement of young people and the encouragement of a general 'watchfulness'. Working closely with communities can create challenges for local authorities, putting a strain on time and resources. However, it is a central component of the NeighbourWood Scheme.
- Strategy for participation: Local participation must entail an ongoing • programme of events and activities, as opposed to a once-off meeting followed by the obligatory tree planting ceremony. For example, a series of activities can be planned on a rolling basis to gain as wide a level of participation as possible, from early inception through to establishment and later on, into ongoing management. Activities include the distribution of information, questionnaires, public and focus group meetings, events for young people and for people from ethnic minorities, etc. These can be initially instigated by the local authority. Later, a local woodland group may gradually emerge to take over the reins, with ongoing back-up and support from the local authority. Key to successful community participation is that it is ongoing, genuine, imaginative and fun for those involved. To assist projects in this regard, a manual is available, entitled Interacting with Greenspace: Public Participating with Professionals in the Planning and Management of Parks and Woodlands (Van Herzele et al. 2005).
- Enthusiastic drivers: Often with NeighbourWood Scheme projects, an individual emerges who leads the charge on the ground. This person might be from within the local authority itself (e.g. a planner, engineer, heritage officer, biodiversity officer). Equally, s/he might be from the community, such as a local activist or a member of a local environmental group. This person is the 'mover and shaker' on the ground, the person who gets things done, who gets people to turn up to meetings, who shakes out further sponsorship from local businesses.



Figure 2: A key requirement under the NeighbourWood Scheme is a partnership between the local authority and the local community in the development of the woodland amenity. Poulgorm Wood, Glengarriff, West Cork.

- **Project 'embedded' in the local infrastructure:** Integration of the project with the local infrastructure is vital. This takes many forms, including integration in local landuse policy, development plans and budgets. It also means integration with other types of local amenities (e.g. wider walking routes, heritage trails and visitor attractions), transport routes, and residential developments. This simply ensures that there is a greater onus on looking after the neighbourwood other than just the neighbourwood itself, i.e. it is part of a bigger picture within that local area.
- Seed capital: Funds under the NeighbourWood Scheme are sometimes used as 'seed capital' to draw in additional funding from other local authority budgets and outside sponsorship sources. This puts the project on a more secure financial footing and broadens the number of players with an interest in seeing it succeed. However, double funding for the same work must be avoided.
- Simple, realistic proposals: It is important that each project is realistic and achievable. Ideally, projects particularly larger ones should be broken down into phases. For example, the first year might involve planting, the second year might involve the installation of pathways, and the third year might involve the installation of seats and other facilities. This breaks the project down into bite-size pieces according to local capacities. This means that people can get used to working together and that the project progresses steadily and on a sustainable basis. Occasionally, expectations are too high



Figure 3: Balrath Woodland in Co Meath is an example of a woodland developed specifically as an 'outdoor classroom' for local schools.

and too much is attempted, and this often leads to tension and disappointment, and to failure.

- The involvement of foresters: Neighbourwood projects often involve a range of professionals within the local authority, including horticulturists, landscape designers, heritage officers, engineers, planners, etc. However, the involvement of a forester as the core member of the team is vital, as this individual will know about the practicalities of woodland establishment and management, will have the contacts with relevant forestry contractors, and will be familiar with working with Forest Service grant schemes. The involvement of a Forest Service Registered Forester is a requirement under the NeighbourWood Scheme.
- **Practical design and management:** The Forest Service looks out for signs that the applicants are pursuing a practical design and management approach to the development of the neighbourwood. Key indicators include the following:
 - The design of the neighbourwood should be simple, focusing on getting the basic woodland blocks established quickly on the ground, to provide a framework for facilities. Complex designs are difficult and expensive to achieve, and are very prone to failure.
 - It is important to adopt natural desire lines (which show how people are already moving across the site) into the pathway network within the new neighbourwood, as people will continue to use these routes in the future.



Figure 4: Castle Demesne in Newcastle West, Co Limerick, offers an attractive and diverse woodland experience within a few minutes walk from the town's square.

- Pioneer species such as birch, alder, rowan and pine should be favoured, particularly on more difficult sites and in areas where damage is expected. These species are robust and grow rapidly on many sites, giving a sense of woodland within a few years. They can provide screens for slower growing and more sensitive species such as oak and beech, or can be used to establish a footing on a site, paving the way for future phased replanting once the idea of woodland has become established in people's minds.
- Forestry techniques relating to ground preparation, transplant nursery stock and vegetation management are the cheapest and most effective way of establishing and managing neighbourwoods, and should be adopted.
- Vandalism and concerns surrounding safety and security are invariably associated with neighbourwoods, and the Forest Service needs to see that these issues have been taken into account in the project.

The role of the NeighbourWood Scheme

The NeighbourWood Scheme is a relatively minor member of the range of schemes available from the Forest Service. However, it plays a key role, as it brings the public benefits of forestry – recreation, biodiversity, landscape, contact with the natural world – to people's very doorsteps. It promotes the wider forestry sector in a positive light, offering urban dwellers a first-hand experience of how forests are managed on a sustainable basis. Moreover, it provides communities with the funding to realise a local resource that will make a meaningful contribution to the health, well-being and

quality of life of local people, and that will help reconnect people with the natural world. Such resources are vital, as we continue into the 21st century.

Full details regarding the scope, procedures and standards under the NeighbourWood Scheme are set out in the *NeighbourWood Scheme Manual* (2008), available from the Forest Service, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The publication entitled *Forest Recreation in Ireland: A Guide for Forest Owners and Managers* (Forest Service 2006) is also designed to assist the development of projects under the scheme. Potential applicants should contact the Forest Service for an update on the current status of the scheme and the level of grant and (in the case of private landowners under Element 2) premium rates available.

Sculpture in Woodland: an example of art in the forest

Bringing together art and the forest

A major project funded in part by the Forest Service NeighbourWood Scheme is Sculpture in Woodland (SinW). SinW is perhaps the most developed example in Ireland of the blending together of art and the forest. Formed in 1994, the group has brought together artists and foresters in the creation of an outdoor gallery in the dramatic semi-natural forest environment of Devil's Glen, situated near the village of Ashford in Co Wicklow.

Devil's Glen is a Coillte-owned forest centred on a deep gorge formed by the Vartry River after the last Ice Age. The woodland contains a variety of forest types, including



Figure 5: Into the Dark by Eileen Mac Donagh (Ireland), Sculpture in Woodland, Devil's Glen, Wicklow. "The idea for this sculpture came to me from an image I saw many years ago in a wood in Japan. The image remained with me and I adapted it to create this 10 metre long intervention over the pathway beside the river."

semi-natural woodland cover, and is designated as a proposed Natural Heritage Area due to its conservation value. It also provides fantastic views over the surrounding Wicklow countryside and the Irish Sea, looking across to Wales. The woodland has long been used as a recreational resource, with a network of well-defined walking routes already in place. In fact, its use for recreation dates back to the 19th century, when travellers visited the area as part of tourist packages that also took in other highlights in the county. Devil's Glen also has a rich social and cultural history. For example, it provided a temporary hiding place, and eventual trap, for doomed insurgents fleeing after the collapse of the 1798 Rising, and has strong associations with the playwright J.M. Synge. All in all, the Devil's Glen provided the ideal home for SinW, having within its boundaries layers and layers of geological, natural, historical and cultural heritage.

SinW was formed with the clear mission to help establish a wood culture in Ireland, by creating a greater awareness of wood as an artistic and functional medium (Magner 1998). Members of the group include foresters and artists from the local area and from further afield, and representatives from various organisations such as Coillte, Wicklow County Council Arts Office and the Forest Service. As with all such organisations, funding is a mixed bag that changes every year as existing sources of sponsorship dry up and new ones emerge. However, the core funders of the project have included Coillte, Wicklow County Council, the Forest Service and the Arts Council. As well as providing office space, Coillte also undertakes most of the onsite work involved with the project in the Glen.



Figure 6: 0121-1110=10210 by Lee Jae-Hyo's (Republic of Korea), Sculpture in Woodland, Devil's Glen, Wicklow. "[The artist] borrows natural materials that are complete and ordered in themselves and uses them so that the finalised figure/sculpture, although a new entity in itself, still has the untouched properties of these natural materials."

Sculptures

Core to SinW's activities is the commissioning of new sculptures. To date, 18 sculptures have been commissioned, involving artists from Ireland and Europe, and from as far away as Korea, Japan, Mexico and Canada. The commissioning process is centred on the acquisition of funding and the drawing up of an outline brief by SinW, to which artists are invited to respond with proposals, based on visits to the Glen. These proposals are then scrutinised, and a selection made. The artist then commences the realisation of the piece, sometimes in his or her own workshop, sometimes in situ within the Glen itself. Once engaged, the artist is supported by SinW and Coillte in terms of sourcing the timber, preparing the site (e.g. foundation work) and installing the piece, which often requires heavy machinery. Commissions can take place singly or in groups, whereby several artists come together to work on pieces, allowing collaboration and synergies to emerge. SinW tries to give artists as free a hand as possible. However, the piece must comprise timber from Ireland (ideally sourced from within the Glen itself), and must be appropriately sited. Another requirement is that it is robust, sturdy and resistant to damage, for public safety reasons and to counter a degree of vandalism that unfortunately is a factor with these types of projects.

Commissions have varied greatly over the years, forming a unique collection that visitors discover as they walk through the wood. Some, such as Lee Jae-Hyo's (Republic of Korea) 0121-1110=10210 defy explanation but are just marvellous objects to look at. Others, such as Janet Mullarney's (Ireland) Panorama and Bella Vista, bring a smile to the face while also challenging us to view things differently. Some have caused considerable controversy, such as The Seven Shrines by Kat O'Brien (Canada), which is a commentary on the lives of the seven generations of women born since Ireland's Great Famine.

A major challenge facing SinW is the maintenance of the pieces. The organisation accepts that, over time, pieces will decay back into the forest or will have to be removed on the grounds of safety. However, the life of the sculptures can be extended by care and maintenance, and repeated repairs are invariably required, as pieces attract the unwelcome attention of vandals. However, while there are usually resources available to create new pieces of work, finding the resources necessary to carry out ongoing maintenance is more difficult, and the collection has suffered as a result. This poses a major challenge for SinW.

New directions

SinW's artistic pursuits also extend beyond sculptures. In the past, it has commissioned paintings and photographs of the Glen. A major addition recently made to the Glen was the inauguration of the Seamus Heaney Walk, developed with the support of the poet himself, who lives nearby. Various excerpts from Heaney's poems have been carved into the backrest of seats positioned at key points along the walk, turning a visit to the Glen into a truly poetic experience.

The most recent commission, *Stone Voices* by Suky Best, also marked a big change in direction. The project originated from a bringing together (or charrette) of 10 artists, sociologists and historians from Ireland, Europe and Australia in September 2005, to explore new ways in which SinW could advance. A proposal by one of the

participating artists, UK's Suky Best, was subsequently adopted by SinW with funding from Wicklow County Council. In this project, Suky spent several weeks in Wicklow collecting accounts about the Glen from local people. These included excerpts from historical records and folklore, and personal stories and experiences. Suky selected 20 short pieces of text from these, which were then mounted in gold leaf onto limestone plaques and placed at key locations throughout the Glen, where the watchful visitor would discover them. Each piece contains an unexplained excerpt – "Every time we come here we get lost", "They say no one has ever drowned here", "When we find the ring, I'll propose" – and it is up to the observer to draw her or his own meaning from it. This project has proven to be highly successful and popular, possibly because it links people directly with the historical, social and cultural layers underpinning the Glen.

SinW has also been involved in a range of other activities in the Glen.

- With funding under the Forest Service NeighbourWood Scheme, SinW has worked with Coillte and Wicklow County Council in a programme involving the upgrade of the recreational infrastructure in the Glen. Existing pathways have been improved and new routes installed. Information boards, waymarkers and seats have also been added. Carparking facilities have received a major upgrade, and facilities for people with disabilities installed. A visitor's guide was also produced (SinW 2004a), pointing out the various things to see and experience along the Upland Walk and the Waterfall Walk, the two major routes through the forest.
- SinW has run a series of educational projects targeted at local schools. A recent project entitled *Through My Eyes* gave school children the basic skills of photography. The children then visited the Glen and took images, which they subsequently mounted and exhibited at a public venue in nearby Wicklow Town. The project overseen by an educational artist and a photographer captured what the Glen means for local young people, and was a huge success.
- SinW has also produced a range of publications associated with the project, including a catalogue of the works in the Glen (SinW 2004b) and a publication entitled *Ecologies of Distance* (SinW 2007), capturing the creative process of the *charrette* that culminated in Suky Best's *Stone Voices* proposal.

Challenges and successes

Although employing an Administrator for much of its time, SinW is basically a voluntary organisation that relies on the goodwill of its committee members and its partner organisations and funders. This leads to a certain ebb-and-flow in activities, as periods of intense activity are followed by those during which the organisation is ticking over. The organisation has also faced various challenges. For example, it is often perceived as a 'forestry' project by the arts community, and as an 'arts project' by the forestry community, and so falls between two stools. Securing ongoing funding for general day-to-day running is also very difficult. Retaining a proper balance between foresters and artists on the committee itself is also a challenge, as is the maintenance of the existing collection. However, with the support of its partners, SinW has achieved much since its formation in 1994, establishing a major sculpture

collection within the dramatic setting of Devil's Glen, and exploring the undeniable common ground shared by both foresters and artists, two vocations firmly embedded in time and place.

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All photos by the author.