

Management of Irregular Forests – Developing the full potential of the forest

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The preface to this book asks some fundamental questions that are beginning to be raised amongst the thousands of new Irish forest owners. “When you own a forest, the question of how you pass it on invariably arises. In what condition should it be maintained? Does one need to spend money? What should one harvest? In short how does one at the same time profit from one’s woodland and leave it in good condition?”

The answers to these questions are cached in this useful book, which is a pioneering document on the management of irregular forests or, as it has become known in Ireland, continuous cover forestry. The book has already become valuable to those practicing irregular forestry in Ireland as a handbook in forest management and planning. It has also become useful as a reference for newcomers to irregular forest management as it provides a justification for, and technical yet understandable background, to this type of management.

One of the difficulties faced by proponents of irregular forestry has been that this kind of management does not lend itself to conventional experimental design and replicated trials in the same way as rotational plantation forests do. Managers follow a set of principals rather than prescriptions and these are interpreted on any site or in any forest type using the foresters experience and instinct. This has meant that, although its advocates are convinced they are making good forest management decisions, it has been difficult to present scientific evidence of the merits of irregular forest management systems in terms of yield, economics, ecology etc.

This fact was acknowledged by a group of private French foresters in the late 1980s who founded the *Association Futaie Irrégulière* (AFI). They wrote an inventory protocol, using permanent sample points, to periodically record the state of irregular forests and the effect of forest management decisions in such a way that reflects the multifunctional services these forests provide. The inventory is repeated on a five-year basis. All intervening inputs (including management and operational costs) and outputs (including timber volumes and revenues) are carefully recorded. The protocol is described in this book and has been applied in over 90 research stands across France, and now in other countries including Ireland, where there are six AFI stands. These stands are also used for demonstration and training purposes.

This book provides the results from selected stands from the AFI network that

have been closely monitored for twenty years. The power of the network is clearly evident in displaying incremental, economic and ecological trends. It is more powerful again for forest owners and managers as it provides a means of performance measurement over time, in terms of the change in the percentage of quality timber products, the capital value of the standing forest, its ecological strength and the economic return from harvest operations.

While the results of sample stands in France are of interest, the real value in this book lies in the publication of both the concept and the protocol, which will facilitate a further expansion of the AFI network in different countries and different forest types.

The book also provides general guidance in the practice of irregular forest management and a series of information sheets on different aspects of this, such as selective felling, permanent infrastructure, marketing, valuation and transforming plantations. This guidance is based on the experience gained in France to date and will require further development over time to suit Irish forest conditions as the AFI network develops further and starts to yield results in Ireland. The book is very well illustrated with photographs, drawings and graphs and also comes with a subtitled, 13 minute-long DVD which further illustrates the concepts discussed.

Management of Irregular Forests is an excellent read for both foresters and forest owners with an interest in silviculture and who have nagging questions about what the future holds for their forest and how it could be managed.

Patrick Purser, September 2013