

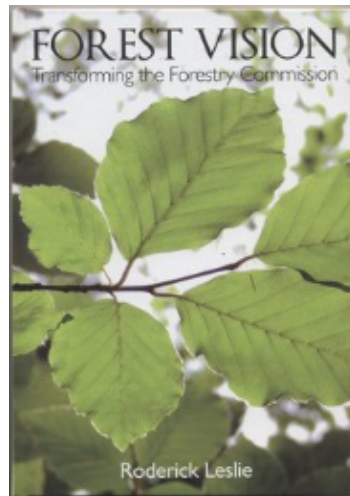
## Forest Vision: Transforming the Forestry Commission

Roderick Leslie.

New Environment Books. 2014.

218 pages. Hardback. ISBN 978-9928789-0-0.

£12.99.



The book contains a personal, almost autobiographical account of Roderick Leslie's career, between joining in 1976 and his retirement 30 years later, in the part of the British Forestry Commission called Forest Enterprise. It does not deal with the Forestry Authority which administers grants. He started just as the Forestry Commission was ending the huge planting programmes of the first 50 years of its existence, to managing the forests it had created: a period of major changes which have also been paralleled in Ireland.

Roderick Leslie joined the Commission after graduating from Oxford University. In the subsequent 30 years, he worked in a very wide variety of posts and ended up as Head of Policy for England. He was at the centre of some violent verbal conflicts that eventually stopped new conifer planting in the uplands; he lived through the near fatal unpopularity of the Forestry Commission in 1988 after the "Flow Country" episode<sup>1</sup>, to the trusted organisation that it is now, with overwhelming public support. This public support halted the Government's plans to sell all the Forestry Commission's forests first when John Major was Prime Minister in 1993-94 and then again in 2010-

<sup>1</sup> The Flow Country is a large expanse of peatland and wetland area of Caithness and Sutherland in Scotland. It amounts to one of the largest expanses of blanket bog in Europe, and covers about 4,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The wetland was severely damaged by extensive drainage and afforestation between 1979 and 1987. Controversy over the management of this area was largely accepted as being responsible for the removal of forestry tax reliefs in the UK.

11 under David Cameron. How this was achieved is what the book is really about. It is an account of splendid leadership during a period of great difficulties.

Mr Leslie describes how the requirement arose for timber production to be balanced with care for the environment, wildlife, landscape, heritage, local employment and recreation. He explains how he recognised that where the population was largely urban, rural areas would lose out. Urban people see the countryside as a place for entertainment and leisure and do not recognise the wider social and economic diversity present in it. In the New Forest, for example, the priorities for management are, in the order stated below:

- Conservation of the natural and cultural heritage;
- Public enjoyment;
- Rural development (including timber production).

The author also points out that the importance of carbon sequestration is largely ignored although it was rated above both timber and biodiversity in a study by the Economics for the Environment Consultancy. A theme throughout the book is how much politicians and career Civil Servants (or “quangocrats”) appear to dislike what the Forestry Commission stands for and have frequently attempted to emasculate it. Early attempts to do this were efforts to extinguish common rights in the New Forest. The current view is usually either that you are commercial or you are for wildlife, or for people, but never all three combined. The problem with the Forestry Commission is that it operates both as a business and as a spending department and bureaucrats simply cannot understand this. The normal government approach revels in its ignorance as people “with wide experience” are appointed to posts requiring a foundation of relevant scientific or technical knowledge. They then try to manipulate policy but are at a complete loss when a situation fails to improve. This has applied equally to the failure of those appointed from the outside to the Forestry Commission to make it more businesslike. Forestry Commission staff are quite the opposite; they have the technical skill and are flexible, and are programmed for immediate action and fast delivery. There has been a view within Government, and especially Defra, saying “do nothing – it’ll be OK, we’ll get away with it”. Agencies are casually re-organised in ways that look designed to deplete the national knowledge base. This lack of professional expertise has been a big factor in addressing many of the problems encountered of recent years.

On recreation, the National Household Survey revealed that after parking the car, countryside visitors want good toilets, refreshments and a chance to buy a souvenir, in that order. The serious museum-style displays of the 1970s feature around 15<sup>th</sup> in people’s preferences. New chunky picnic furniture designs were introduced and standards of construction and design were vastly improved during the 1980s. The

importance of catering for local visitors was recognised for the first time. Creating facilities that appeal to children was accepted in 1990 with the opening of the play trail at the Moors Valley country park in East Dorset. The author regrets that more versions of this popular place were not constructed more quickly.

The management of unusual habitats was also a major priority; heathlands have been a target for restoration as the biggest potentially open habitat in England. This is in spite of the view that it is more “natural” not to manage. Doing nothing does not lead back to the “Wildwood” which occurred before human intervention. Even the Woodland Trust and National Trust now recognise this.

The 1985 British broadleaves policy signalled an end to planting conifers in England and the beginning of a phase of restoration. The author goes into some of the many financial problems endured by the Forestry Commission. He says that every time foresters saved 10% on costs, the value of timber went down 20% until he finally realised that the Forestry Commission’s financial problems were not going to be resolved by a recovery in prices. Other assets, especially income from recreation and cellphone transmission masts, had to work. English woodlands are so under-thinned and generally unmanaged, that timber production could probably double without planting a single new tree. In 1992, as part of the fallout from the Flow Country episode, the Forestry Commission was split between land management and regulatory functions; the so-called Forest Enterprise and Forestry Authority.

After a somewhat rocky start, forest certification has become entrenched as part of forestry in Britain, in fact the UK was the first country to have the whole of its publically owned forests fully FSC certified. It remains unpopular with smaller owners, being disproportionately costly for them.

In a chapter entitled “The Cutting Edge”, the author explains how a new and powerful alliance between the Forestry Commission and private sector developed. Such things as concerts, mountain cycling and “Go Ape” have proved immensely popular with teenagers and young adults. The latter two also provide popular adrenalin fixes. The aftermath of the collapse of the coal industry in the 1980s signalled the start of environmental improvement of derelict land for deprived communities. Urban practitioners were of little help and, being egged on by landscape architects on percentage fees, their schemes were often hugely expensive and inappropriate. In the drive for “privatisation” it was found that medium to large companies’ proposals were unimaginative, risk averse and greedy; and where local authorities were involved, the scale of enthusiasm and ambition by local people and organisations died away as local authority involvement increased. Smaller businesses have proved very different, ranging from Go Ape to cycling. Local people were also involved in imaginative planning, which resulted in a dog swimming pond being constructed at Jeskyns Wood. Roderick Leslie believes that what the Forestry Commission did in the urban fringe

during the 2000s is an achievement comparable to the original drive for reforestation.

For the future the author notes that the Bishop of Liverpool's Independent Panel on forestry called for a new woodland culture to be developed. He (Mr Leslie) believes that there are two obvious, big, directions for the Forestry Commission and forestry in England: the first is around towns and cities, and the second is related to the low carbon economy and climate change. These will be the challenges for the future. Another key challenge is that, whoever owns the present Forestry Commission estate, it will be desirable to do several things simultaneously, the way the Forestry Commission does today. Roderick Leslie concludes that the forests are not safe yet!

This splendidly written book will interest anyone involved professionally in forestry or who appreciates and enjoys forests, especially those who have been involved since the 1970s. It is clearly and simply written and reveals much that is completely new to lay people. I only wish it had been available for our students at Oxford before I retired.

*Peter Savill*

*This review was originally prepared for  
the Woodland Heritage Journal 2015  
where it will also be printed.*