

EDITORIAL

As above, so below

As above, so below,
as within, so without,
as the universe, so the soul...

Hermes Trismegistus

I remember visiting a forest stand as a student with Professor Gardiner. The theme was silviculture and in response to whatever searching question we were posed, there were many blank looks and much staring at the trunks in front of us. “Look up, look up, a forester should always look up first,” was the exasperated refrain we were treated to. Wisdom can take time to settle in the minds of students, but “looking up” seems such an obvious perspective now. However, in the early days a question about timber production seemed naturally to draw our eyes to the stems rather than the photosynthetic sails aloft, busily harnessing what light was available to drive productivity. The fact that most plant species on this island are light-limited should be constantly to the fore while considering the silvicultural options available in striving to meet the multiple objectives that are now demanded of our forest stands.

Silviculture, the core discipline of forestry, is reasserting its importance. In light of the alarming example of how easily and quickly ash may be removed from our forests, allowing the national forest estate to become more dependent on a single species, even one as dependable and robust as Sitka spruce, is unacceptable. The obvious way to change this situation is to plant a more diverse range of species. This in turn, will test our ability to more actively and specifically manage the resulting forest stands. Perhaps in the past we may have been lulled into relying too heavily on the considerable abilities of Sitka spruce to accommodate great variations in site quality and, at times, questionable management decisions. The practice of progressive silviculture in Ireland is currently hampered to some considerable extent by the rigidity of the Afforestation Scheme and its Grant Premium Categories (GPCs) which guide plantation designs along the *safest* route. The significant financial penalties imposed by the Forest Service in the last few years means that it is safer to plant blocks of Sitka spruce than to attempt a more innovative approach (which might result in a penalty or require additional financial inputs to qualify for final grant payment). Such a conservative policy will only serve to increase the risk posed by potential pest or diseases, or indeed from climate change, and certainly will not increase the afforestation area. Perhaps we should pluck a leaf from progressive corporate culture

(Deloitte, Forbes, Google, Apple, MS, etc.) where policy is often not to punish, and even sometimes to reward, failed innovation, so long as a clear rationale was provided. This fosters a progressive and innovative culture within the company. Could the grant-aided Irish forestry sector take on such an ideal?

An example of the restriction imposed by the afforestation GPCs is the limited scope for planting broadleaf mixtures. To date this has resulted in the large monocultural blocks of ash that are now of such uncertain fate. Unless foresters are allowed to practice their profession fully and develop planting and management schemes entirely of their own design (obviously within best practice guidelines), without the threat of draconian penalties when these prescriptions don't work out as planned, the situation will not be remedied. Greater flexibility would surely foster innovation, learning, enthusiasm, partnership (from both public and private sectors) and support the true concept of sustainable forest management. Is this not the best way to create multifunctional forests which can provision multiple ecosystem services and, critically, build and increase the resilience of the entire industry?

A basic requirement is the widening of the approved species list, particularly in view of the increased threats to our forest resource and the ongoing loss of species from the list. At first glance it is disappointing that the approved list of grant-aided species is somewhat limited, however, it is heartening that the Forest Service intimates that it will consider proposals to use species not mentioned on the list.

The theme of silvicultural development is accorded considerable presence in this issue of *Irish Forestry*. Hawe and Short present an in-depth and extensive review of examples of European broadleaf silviculture which are of relevance to Ireland. Providing a focused development to this theme, Fennessy et al. describe a variation of traditional French silviculture which aims to produce high quality oak lumber from substantially shortened rotations. They combine this with a report on trials of "free grown" oak in the UK. Both these articles provide abundant food to inspire innovative silviculture as well as enlightened stewardship. So much for the "carrot" approach. An article by McInerney et al., which describes a remote sensing method of assessing the forest damage wreaked by Storm Darwin, serves as a striking reminder of why it doesn't pay to keep all one's eggs in one basket. Adding to this timely warning is a letter from the only practicing forest pathologist on this island, who makes some useful suggestions on protecting forest and plant health on the island of Ireland. De Miguel-Muñoz et al. explore the reaction of the wood processing sector to an alternative silvicultural system for producing biomass. Also from WIT, Coates et al. make a comparison between various machine methods for harvesting biomass. Interestingly, there are three articles describing ecosystem service provision in Irish forestry: Bullock et al. review the extent and value of such services, Griffin details Coillte's progress in providing and protecting such services, while Iwata et al.

investigate and discuss the health benefits of visiting and spending time in forests.

The Forest Perspectives section features several interesting articles; for example, Forrest describes the history of ceremonial tree planting at Áras an Uachtaráin, while Mc Loughlin investigates the etymology of Irish placenames associated with trees. And lest any reader fears or imagines any lack of interest for Sitka spruce-philés, a burgeoning Book Review section holds among its nine reviews, a gem entitled *Shades of Green, An Environmental and Cultural History of Sitka Spruce* by Tittensor. It is reassuring to note from the extensive list of recent publications, the obvious continuing interest in the printed word. Equally reassuring is the reappearance of the Letters to the Editor section. The second of two letters in this section makes a case for more enlightened stewardship in assessing actual site suitability as well as the true environmental benefit of forestry

Of course, the building of resilience in this sector will depend on the ingenuity and novel approaches of its personnel, a cornerstone of which will be to increase the numbers of high calibre students. However, in order to attract them, all those working in or sharing an interest in Irish forestry have a job to do to change and ameliorate the public perception of forestry “and all that therein is”.