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EDITORIAL

SYLVIE RULES HERE — O.K.?

DESPITE the greatly accelerated afforestation rate of the past 30 years, this is still an island of bare mountains, of treeless, boggy plains. And with less than 5% of the land surface under forest, one might be forgiven for thinking that it will remain so for the foreseeable future. However, this would be a dangerous attitude to adopt. A 500 hectare plantation in 10,000 hectares of blanket bog represents only 5% of the area under forest, but aesthetically it may radically alter the character of the whole bog. We have in our stark mountains and our wild, barren plains something quite rare in temperate regions, examples of which should be preserved and the pristine landscape maintained.

There are many examples in Ireland of forests established in recent years in large tracts of previously untouched blanket bog, or on the slopes of bare mountains. For the most part, these plantations represent a wise use of a resource which had previously been relatively unproductive.

Occasionally, however, the new forest may have appeared to some people to be a blot on the natural landscape, something foreign which did not belong there. It would be foolish in the extreme to condemn the afforestation of blanket bog or open mountains. It is difficult, without detailed information, to sit in judgement over the afforestation of any particular tract of land. The problem lies not in the decision to plant an area, but in the criteria upon which that decision is based. Each site is closely scrutinized to see if it is amenable to ploughing and is, therefore, plantable. But is there any room in the decision-making process for a consideration of what would be lost as a result of the establishment of a plantation?

There is a loss factor which should be taken into account. Who should be the accountant? Perhaps, in the Republic, this could be a function of the newly formed Department of the Environment.