

A New Interpretation of Forest Recreation Management

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INTRODUCTION

We now have 1½ million visitors coming to our forests each year. This figure speaks for the success of amenity developments to date. What we have produced has served us well over the past 16 years. However, I believe that we have now reached a plateau. Before embarking on the next phase of development we need to reflect on, and more clearly define, the nature and the possibilities of the job of recreation. Irish forest recreation has developed with little written policy backing and with even less philosophical debate on the need for, and the direction that such development should take place. The arguments for a written policy have been presented elsewhere and need no further mention here (Kennedy and McCusker 1983). However, the reasoning behind the need for such development should be looked at. We need to crystalise our ideas on why we are in the game of forest recreation.

WHO IS THE FOREST VISITOR?

The first thing we need to do is to get a handle on the forest visitor. Who is he, where does he come from, and what is he coming for? From two forest visitor surveys, (Bagnall *et al* 1978, and Kilpatrick 1964) we find that in the words of the visitors themselves they come for "peace and quiet", "for physical exercise", "for the atmosphere of a forest" which they define as being "restful and refreshing", and "to get away from everyone". From the same surveys we know that virtually all of our visitors come from cities or towns. If amenity developments therefore are to be relevant they cannot be viewed in isolation from major problems confronting urban society.

There is a feeling at large that western society is undergoing some fundamental change. The likely consequence of this change is still only dimly understood. In magnitude it is thought likely to be as great as that which ushered in the industrial revolution. Loss of jobs, frightening though that is, is only part of the problem. The drift

from the stabilising influence of religion, of any sort, is also only part of the difficulty. There is the fundamental problem of modern man largely no longer able to comprehend the world in which he finds himself. Science has permeated so many areas to such an extent, that the common man does not understand most things (Steiner, 1960). He has been offered comfort at the expense of understanding. I believe that he has traded part of his dignity in the transaction. I am not criticising science here. It is the modern day Merlin. It gives many a life style the envy of medieval kings. I am saying that if we are to remain in the real sense, a human society, we need to infuse into our world a counter balance to the psychological effects of modern technology. In our Irish situation, in particular, I believe that this problem of alienation has been compounded by the mass movement from rural to urban living that has occurred over the last 15 years. By the year 2,000, three million people will be living in urban settlements in this country. Over two million of these will be living in the Dublin area (An Foras Forbartha, 1981).

What has any of this to do with forest recreation developments? In my view — a lot. The visitor coming to our forests is coming out of this urban backdrop. Amenity development can play a part in reducing this sense of alienation. We might examine four streams of development here.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Forest recreation can contribute to an understanding of our heritage. To understand who we are, we need to know where we have come from. Scattered among our forests and among our forest parks in particular, there is a collection of ruins — castles, icehouses, labourers' cottages, sawmills, etc. Most of these buildings are not important enough to fall under the protection of the Office of Public Works. The question therefore arises, whose responsibility are they? They stand on Forest and Wildlife (FWS) property, but I feel that the FWS has never quite made up its mind as to its responsibility for such buildings. In fairness to the organisation, quite often it was the case that remnants of estates were thrust upon it for development into recreation areas. I suspect that the FWS does not see itself as having a brief for maintenance of buildings that are essentially ruins. But these ruins, out of all proportion to their size, add immeasurably to the human interest of our forest parks. Visitors relate strongly to these ruins. They are the evidence of the hand of man of another age. In many cases, these structures loom large as the focal points within our forest parks. If we are not to lose these structures, one by one, there is a need to decide which are worth retaining, and then to make the means available for their

repair. There seems an opportunity here to avail of the Youth Employment Scheme for much of this work. I am not suggesting that such ruins be repaired and roofed. I am saying that many of them justify being stabilised and retained as ruins.

There are also a number of ring-forts, burial-chambers, crannogs, etc. standing on forest land. In all, the remains of pre 17th century monuments scattered across the 26 counties run to 200,000 units (Cooney, 1983). These, in combination with more recent monuments such as mine works, water wheels, famine relief schemes, add up to an impressive collection of structures from our past. Many of these are small and are often found half buried in gorse or bracken. When viewed in isolation they seem but of passing importance. However, many of these, if they were linked together, displayed and interpreted, could tell the story of the mythology, folklore and history of our past. We have all come from that history. Developments of this nature could go some of the distance to give us back our sense of who we are. We often talk of the need to revive the Irish language as though it alone can give us an identity. Are these structures not also a language?

It probably would be the case that developments of this nature would function best under the umbrella of a National Heritage Council, if such a Council ever comes into existence. If it does, and if it picks up this idea and requests the involvement of the FWS, I would hope that we would see the social relevance of such developments.

There is a practical side to this sort of development. Bord Failte research since the mid-seventies shows that about 40% of overseas visitors, questioned in surveys, gave one of their reasons for visiting the country to see at least one historic site (Cooney, 1983).

ACTIVE USE OF FORESTS

Our recreational developments to date are essentially passive in nature. Part of the reason for this is historical. It was not so long ago that we actively discouraged the public from coming to our plantations. When we did in time, open the gates, it was on the understanding that the public would use the forests in 'quiet pursuit' activities. In practice this meant walking and the use of nature trails. These activities proved popular and I am sure they will continue to be so. But there is another type of trail development that we might now consider.

Teenagers need to test themselves and to test their world. They want to show-off to their friends and indeed to themselves. Opportunities to do this in suburban housing estates are either pretty limited or they are anti-social. This is the failure of town

planners, architects and builders. Boredom can result from an absence of fear and danger, the consequence of which we can read about nightly in our newspapers.

The FWS could develop what I would call 'rough trails'. These trails would offer youngsters an opportunity to show what they are made of. Such trails would run across the roughest, meanest topography in the forest. Little more than ropes, logs, and stepping stones would be on offer for the benefit of the user. Danger would be a necessary part of these trails if they are to be of benefit. They could be graded for difficulty. Through publicity, the nature of such trails could be explained to parents. As things stand, for some youngsters, it is far more exciting to root up picnic tables and to burn down forest huts than to walk on tame hiking trails. Forestry could offer city kids a challenge. Not all have the means to buy sail-boards or canoes. "Rough trails" would incur no expense to the user. I cannot say how successful such trails might be. I simply do not know. It would be useful to discuss this idea with adventure sports organisations and youth clubs to get a reaction. I recommend that we do this.

In the matter of development of long distance walking trails, where the FWS is involved directly or indirectly, the criteria should be that such trails be run across interesting topography and not merely on existing roadways of convenience. After all these trails, once developed, are likely to remain in use, essentially unaltered for several hundred years. The quality of trail experience is therefore more important than the number of kilometres laid down in a year.

PONY TREKKING

Ireland is well known abroad for its horses. It is also known for its scenery. Yet we have been slow to develop bridal paths. The FWS has been nibbling at the idea for some years now. I think that we should look at the possibilities more clearly. In the Bord Failte Tourism Plan 1982-86 it is stated that one of the intentions is to 'stimulate additional trail riding establishments'. Greater use of forest lands towards this end would help here. In particular I have in mind the Dublin-Wicklow Mountain area where there is potential for year round usage. Discussion with Bord Failte on the capital cost of such developments might be sought. Cost of trail maintenance should clearly be applied against the user. Why should the Forest and Wildlife Service, in particular, be the agency for such developments? The extensive acreage owned by this public body, the generally favourable scenic location of these plantations, and the spread of forest labour over these routes, would make the FWS the logical service to be responsible for this development.

FOREST ATMOSPHERE

The forest makes its impact through the mood it invokes, through a weave of colours, sounds, shapes and changing climate. The greater the beauty and variety, the greater the impact. The visual problem of modern plantations is not that they may be formed of conifer species, but the utilisation manner in which these species are planted and tended. The trend is to lay out plantations for the convenience of machines. The tendency is to manage out any spontaneity and unpredictability that might otherwise occur. The results can be visually impoverished landscape.

Tests on visitor preference in the United States shows that there is a preference by the public for forests that appear natural. One interesting survey carried out in Arizona has shown that the physical characteristics of a forest are not the only determinants of public reaction to its scenic beauty (Anderson, 1981). It was found that merely changing the description on a piece of land altered the public perception of the quality of that landscape. In this experiment, using identical photographs, but labelling them under six different classifications among which were "Wilderness area", "Recreation area" and "Commercial Timber Stand", it was shown that the public responded on a decreasing scale to lands labelled with increasing degrees of commercialisation. The same reaction was found by Hodgson and Thayer in California. The more natural a stand appeared to be, the higher the rating it received. We cannot assume that the same attitudes will prevail for the Irish situation. We need to do our own surveys to establish public attitudes in this area. We often make publicity out of the fact that 400 forests are open to the public as though the numbers game in itself was of particular importance. If surveys were to show clear preferences for apparent naturalness it might be best to divide plantations into those to be managed on strict economic criteria with no public facilities considered, and a smaller number of forests, in the main, lying in the proximity of cities and towns, to be managed for atmosphere as well as wood production. For the benefit of visitors this latter group of forests might be identified as "Recreation Forests".

AN EDUCATIONAL FUNCTION

That we develop nature trails and trail booklets establishes the fact that Recreation Section is in the business of public education. The spur for this type of development was Conservation Year 1970. The spur may have been there, but there are no official documents reasoning the need to become involved in public education. I suspect it was simply seen as 'a wholesome business' in which to be

engaged. In this absence of debate, public education has developed along pretty narrow lines. I would argue three reasons why we should be involved in public education:

(a) Being a public service, and the nature of forest work in particular being so highly visible, it is prudent that we inform the public about the nature of forest operations if we are to prevent unnecessary misunderstanding of what we do. Traditionally we have been obsessively secretive about our work. It would be of benefit to generally loosen up our public relations.

(b) The FWS has the responsibility of implementing the Wildlife Bill. The success of this Bill will largely depend on public acceptance of the need to conserve wild things. Laws and regulations ultimately never protect. Perception of the value of wildlife is the key. Politics is the persuasion of numbers. How easy resources would become available to Wildlife Section if there was widespread appreciation of nature. At the moment there is no such appreciation. There is a saying that is apt here. Through education — understanding: through understanding — appreciation: through appreciation — conservation. I am convinced that at the end of the day, that way lies the success of the Wildlife Bill. We need a far greater input into public education. In my view, Forest Parks should be identified as special areas where nature study and a public consensus view sympathetic towards wildlife would be nourished. In a number of these parks we need to build interpretative facilities and we need to staff these on a year round basis.

(c) There is a second need for interpretative facilities which is more difficult to define. At the beginning of this paper I suggested that considerable numbers of people have partially lost their sense of identity. A guidance into man's place in nature could help here. I am not talking now of education. I am not talking of the mere listing of facts. I am talking of forest park programmes which interpret nature and man's place in it. Done at its best, interpretation of this nature touches on an understanding of our humanity. At its best, it reaches towards the nature of life and all things caught up in this mystery. At its best, it gives an insight, dim though that insight may be, into the face of eternity. And out of this experience can come understanding and contentment. This is clearly a step beyond public education. It is a provocation of the visiting public to reflect on social values and circumstances. In American and Canadian park management this idea is central to their interpretative programmes.

Our society in many ways has lost its way. I am not suggesting that society's problem will be solved by the FWS. They will not. Most of the problems will be solved, if they are to be solved at all, inside city boundaries. They will be solved by many agencies contributing part of the solution. Forest recreation programmes can be part of the solution. We can no longer afford the luxury of merely supplying forest walks, pleasant though such developments may be. We need to develop public usage of forests that is relevant to the social needs of a computer society.

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