

Forestry, the 1990s and Beyond

Jim Whiteside

Conservation Officer, Forest Service (N.I.).

Summary

The creation of large-scale conifer plantations by both public and private forestry organisations has attracted much public criticism during the past decade.

Foresters should seek to improve their image and actively influence the forestry debate so that commercial forestry may be seen as contributing a positive role to countryside conservation.

Introduction

The year 1992 is likely to hold some significance in the lives of inhabitants of the European Community and may serve to concentrate the mind on future pathways for us all. What should the forester expect of the 90s and beyond? How will his work, lifestyle and expectations require to be adjusted in order to cope with a world that has become super-sensitive to environmental issues and to satisfy a public that paradoxically, are critical of our man-made forests, yet concerned at the lack of Ireland's tree cover?

The Forestry Industry

Because of its long-term growth pattern, forestry is exposed to many changes both in public attitudes and values during the course of a single crop rotation. Past failures may be viewed as successes in the future, as each generation of people come to regard themselves as being more enlightened than their predecessors. Unfortunately management decisions have often to be made in the light of short-term expediency, sometimes as a reaction to prevailing political forces or strong attacks by pressure groups. Current concern with the conservation of our environment is a typical example and just one of the forces acting on the industry at the present time. Forestry, therefore, is constantly under review, influenced perhaps too frequently by the all-powerful media, creating a chain reaction of public opinion and eventual governmental decision-making. One thing seems certain, however – the production of timber is likely to remain a priority and the North American Sitka spruce the main provider of raw material for the steadily expanding sawmilling and wood processing industries.

The fundamental issue of the 21st century is more likely to be how we go about the job of timber growing rather than whether we should not afforest land. Public discussion and eventual governmental decision-making are likely to continue to be media dominated. It behoves our industry, therefore to get its act together, presenting a package of multiple land use, embracing recreation, conservation, sport, all the many compatible uses of land while it is growing a timber crop in an environmentally sensitive manner. None of the minority uses need be seen to detract in any way from the fundamental objective of growing wood. Forestry during the next century and in the last decade of the present one must be accepted for its social value in addition to its commercial role if it is not to be sacrificed on the altar of public opinion.

Presenting an image

The average citizen of the British Isles is largely uninformed and perhaps uninterested in forestry as we know it. They seldom have had the opportunity of seeing, let alone comprehending, what takes place within the forest gate. Tales of mega-millionaires salting away surplus money in the Flow Country of Caithness and of blanket bogs in Ireland being afforested in the interests of personal and corporate gain, do little to enhance our image. Foresters must first of all believe in the social and environmental value of their forests, move away from defensive positions and adopt a pro-active strategy to combat a poor public conception. They should seek to become identified with good environmental management and not its destruction.

All, however, is not gloom in our industry. There has been much good publicity from our forest parks, forest nature reserves and wildlife. Unfortunately, these aspects are not necessarily linked with commercial timber production in peoples' minds. They are seen as functions in their own right and it is not immediately obvious that they are entirely dependent upon the forest for their existence. The public image that we must seek to project is one of a vibrant, broadly-based industry that may be sub-divided into many functions, yet retains the fundamental purpose of wood production. The "march of the conifers" and the "coniferisation" of our hillsides must be seen to be an enhancement of the environment and a positive social asset by ensuring on the one hand, that we carry out sound plantation design principles and on the other hand seek to inform, consult and co-operate with our potential critics. The media will not be found wanting in this respect, it will largely be our own fault if we do not get to their door first with our good news.

The Forester

Foresters tend to be an introverted race of people. Their everyday work is specialised, its location isolated and their efforts not always understood by the layman. Dealing with the successes and failures of a past generation of colleagues and creating forests of the future requires a special mixture of

dedication, faith, tenacity and unlimited patience with a general public who have suddenly become ecologists! Exhorted to replace the trees consumed during the war years, the forester set to with skill and dedication. Today, he views his creations of the 50s with some degree of pride as the forests begin to feed the increasingly hungry wood factories. To his consternation, however, in the light of current public opinion he is being censured for having produced ecological deserts, blots on the landscape, acidifying watercourses and is being viewed as some sort of environmental pariah!

The forester of the 90s and beyond must actively seek to broaden the forestry debate on a local basis. He has a number of important weapons at his disposal – locally he is seen as a landlord, an employer of people and a manager of resources. In addition to his silvicultural skills he must add those of the public relations arena. Communities must be involved in decision-making and communications constantly maintained with the formulators of opinion. A two-way flow of information will result in better forests, fulfilling local needs and a better understanding of what timber growing entails and the problem that it has to face. Forestry has become a multiple land use, the forester must react accordingly and adjust his profile from that of backroom boffin to one of public benefactor. The volume of timber production is unlikely to be reduced as a result and let's face it, life might just be that more interesting!

Some suggestions for image enhancement

1. Get to know the editor and staff of the local newspaper(s). Journalists welcome suggestions, particularly of a “green” nature and ideas discussed over a pint or a cup of coffee will invariably be rewarding.

2. Presenters of wildlife and countryside programmes on radio and television are delighted to receive suggestions for potential features. It makes their work easier and personal contact will open many doors.

3. Become a member of the local Naturalist Society or Field Club. These groups have great influence both locally and nationally. Membership allows a two-way flow of information and many a potential confrontation may be settled “in house” free from the glare of media attention.

4. Maintain a close liaison with the staff of local schools. They will always require material for nature tables, forest walks and assistance with projects. It is time-consuming but rewarding in the long-term.

The day of the forest classroom has arrived and as yet teachers lack confidence in its interpretation. Assistance will always be much appreciated.

5. Accept every opportunity of speaking to local organisations such as Young Farmers' Clubs, Rotary, Round Table and Farming discussion groups.

When doing so remember some important points:

Avoid, speaking in forestry jargon. P. Years, P.B.R., provenances and re-spacing may convey little or nothing to the layman.

Never, underestimate one's audience. Be sure of facts and if possible do some research into who may be present. The little old lady in the corner or the grey-haired gentleman dozing in the back row may either or both hold Ph.Ds in ecology.

Never, talk "down" to an audience from an assumed position of superior knowledge. An overtly superior approach is the hallmark of a fool and encourages audience hostility.

Lastly, in a confrontation situation, the Willow is invariably less prone to windthrow than the Oak.!



PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: Forest District Conservation Committee meeting in action, Co. Down, 1989. Representatives of voluntary, statutory and local countryside interests meet to advise forest management.