

Conflicts in forestry – a changing culture

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Introduction

I have no qualifications in forestry. I am one of those people who sometimes describe themselves by using the amorphous title 'environmentalist'. But my work in the media does give me an insight into attitudes towards forestry, both by the general public and by the environmental movement.

The profession of the forester is obviously one that has more 'environmental impact', to use a fashionable phrase, than most. Coillte is the largest single landowner in the country and everything it does has a profound effect on our countryside. Private forestry and farm forestry are growing so rapidly that their environmental effects have become something that concerns everyone in Ireland.

The context in which this is happening is one of general environmental concern which is growing so rapidly no forester can afford to ignore it. In less than the time-span between planting a spruce and harvesting the first thinnings, the green movement has completely de-marginalised itself. It is no longer the arena of cranks and crackpots. It has become a major element in the election manifestos of all the political parties, the concern of a large Directorate in EU headquarters, and something that consumes an increasing amount of the energies of the media, government and legislators.

Brendan Howlin, Minister for the Environment, captured the Zeitgeist earlier this year when he announced new draft planning guidelines on forestry development. He said, "While the development of afforestation can make a positive contribution to sustainable development and bring economic benefits to the rural community, it must also be recognised that afforestation can sometimes give rise to environmental problems".

But 'environmental' is a large and very ill-defined word. If we accept that foresters will, to an increasing extent, have to defend their activities to a generally hostile public, where will the battle lines be drawn? What are the contentious issues?

My thesis is that forestry developments, private or public, now need to justify themselves to the outside world under three headings, *viz.* economic, aesthetic and environmental. I would now like to look at the public perception of how traditional forestry is performing under each of these headings.

Economic justification

To an outsider, forest accountancy seems more like an art than a science. The enormous time-span between investment and return, and the huge percentage of unrealised assets which result from this, seem to make a mockery of most normal business methods. But

there is a growing public belief that most conventional forestry in this country does not really make money, that it is failing to justify itself under the 'economic' heading.

It doesn't take a financial genius to discover the price per tonne of Sitka spruce delivered to the pulp mills or the ports, to work out the cost of felling, extraction and transportation, to add on site purchase and preparation, planting and maintenance costs and to come up with a balance sheet which would have my bank manager calling me in to his office for a serious talk.

Aesthetic justification

The 'aesthetic' heading is one which responds less to actuarial skills. But money does come into it too, if the broader view is taken. One third of this country's Gross Domestic Product is now derived from tourism-related business. It is accepted that the beauty of our landscape is one of our principal tourism products. The bulk of this tourism is located in parts of the country where land prices are low and the visual impact of forestry is high. So, leaving conservation and our rights to our natural heritage aside, it is possible to argue that a geometrically shaped plantation of monoculture spruce planted up a hillside is bad for business.

Added to this is the fact that people live in our countryside and are increasingly demanding a say in what the countryside surrounding them looks like. They want some control over the view from their windows. They want it in West Wicklow, in West Cork, in Leitrim and in an ever-increasing list of places. Most of them do not like the look of conventional forestry plantations.

Environmental justification

Under the 'environmental' heading, the arguments get even more complicated. On the one hand, Ireland has less tree cover today than any other country in the world where tree cover is the natural climax vegetation. The achievement of the forestry profession in increasing the tree cover from around 5% of the total land area to close to 8% in a century should be something for which all environmentalists need to congratulate them. This is particularly true in the context of the destruction of bogs, as bogs are nearly as efficient as forests when it comes to sequestering atmospheric carbon.

On the other hand, the amount of broadleaf or 'semi-natural' tree cover in the country has actually declined in the past century. From an environmental viewpoint, foresters, motivated by the unrealistic targets of politicians, have been planting the wrong trees in the wrong places. 'Wrong' because monocultures are not as environmentally benign as mixed woodlands. 'Wrong' because exotic species are not as environmentally benign as native ones. 'Wrong' because fragile and valuable sites, particularly on upland and lowland bogs, have been sacrificed to the trees. 'Wrong' because clearfell management systems adversely affect the environment in several ways. 'Wrong' because some direct environmental damage has been caused by drainage, fertiliser runoff and the acidification of soil and water.

Incidentally, the claim made by some foresters that soil and water acidification caused by conifer needle drop is 'unproven' is particularly annoying. Darwin's Theory of Evolution is unproven - that's why it's a theory. The same is true of most other things in the life

sciences where, as often as not, we are working on a definite balance of probability. The balance of probability is definitely that, as all vegetable matter produces humic acids when it decays, needle drop in forestry plantations further acidifies what are normally acid soils to start with. Anyone with any pretensions to understanding scientific method who argues to the contrary is being downright dishonest.

This dishonesty arises, of course, out of defensiveness. Foresters are intelligent people who are aware of the swelling body of public dislike and distrust for their profession. But it seems to me that there are other possible reactions to this pressure apart from going on the defensive.

The way ahead?

Irish foresters inherited a method of forestry from their British forebears which was radically 'state of the art' in about 1880. It consisted of abandoning many older silvicultural principles in favour of the new 'crops' from North America and the continent. These crops were managed in the familiar way of planting nursery-grown stock on 'green field' sites, thinning, clearfelling and replanting. In the course of the past century, this method of forestry has remained fairly static. About the only development has been a reduction in the number of species planted. Today, Coillte virtually relies on Sitka spruce, while only small quantities of other species are planted by the private sector.

It seems to me that, coming up to the turn of another century, it is an ideal time for a new generation of Irish foresters to make another radical change and develop a new forestry method which will take account of all the pressures that are bearing down on the profession. The 'global village' leaves us with no excuse for ignoring other approaches to forestry in other cultures. We must accept that there are alternatives to monocultures of exotic conifers, alternatives to green field planting and clearfelling, and alternatives to Sitka spruce. And it seems to me that many of these alternatives would perform rather better under my three suggested headings.

The old problem that has bedevilled Irish forestry has been government policies that insisted on large annual planting targets but only provided the sort of funds which would buy very cheap land. The accepted escape from this problem today is to get the trees on to better land by expanding on-farm forestry. Another solution would be to stick to the bad land and change crops and management practices.

A huge amount of cutaway bog will become available for tree planting over the next 30 years (over 100,000 ha of Bord na Mona land alone by 2030). Many of the upland forestry sites will mature, but when they do, they will be incapable of being returned to the type of habitat they were before planting. It will remain the responsibility of foresters to find something to do with them which is both valuable and acceptable.

I would suggest to the new revolutionaries in Irish forestry that they need to look at native birch as a crop in both upland and lowland sites. They need to research how it could be improved and what it could be used for. They need to investigate growing it in mixed plantations with species such as aspen, rowan and the willows. They need to look at selective felling and coppice-wood regimes in other countries and how they work with these species.

I also suggest to these cells of subversive foresters that they should examine carefully some of the prejudices that surround the forestry of the older generation. They need to

explode the myth that 'broadleaved trees are only suitable on good land', and the one claiming that there are only two types of forestry, 'commercial' and 'amenity'. They should challenge the notion that cropping can only be on a medium to long rotation and that wood pulp should be the principal product of our forests.

Conclusion

There is a growing public and political perception that forestry is too important to be left to foresters. But we certainly need trees. The challenge is to show that forestry professionals are imaginative and innovative enough to develop a method that is profitable, acceptable and beautiful, which perform under the headings of 'economic', 'aesthetic' and 'environmental'. It can be done. In fact, it must be done.