

The professional forester – shaping the future

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Paper presented at the Annual Symposium of the Society of Irish Foresters, May 1996

Summary

The past decade has been one of rapid change in forest policies. There is growing acceptance that a wide range of individuals and interest groups (representing conservation, recreation, socio-economics, etc.) are legitimate stakeholders in forestry along with the timber processors. These new demands came to a head at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), and again in the 1993 Helsinki Conference, the conclusions of which are binding upon all European states, including the Republic of Ireland. In this environment, it is not the function of the professional forester to set policy, but rather to achieve the balance between all competing demands.

Introduction

We live in a new age. Forests are no longer simply the domain of the forester, woodman and lumberjack. They now have a plethora of 'stakeholders' ranging from the rambler, through the conversationalist, to those interested in global climate change. Most recently, people who live in and around forests have staked their claim to be heard, and are now increasingly demanding a share in the wealth created by the forest.

It has become commonplace to remark that today's foresters have greater demands placed upon their professionalism than at any time in the recent past. It then becomes pertinent to ask three questions. First, what are these demands and who or what are shaping them? Second, what is the nature of the response professional foresters should be making if they are to retain the claim to professionalism? Third, and finally, if we are a profession, how should we be organised and what responsibilities do we have to each other, to society at large, and to the forest?

Increased professional demand

As already mentioned, we now acknowledge a wide constituency of stakeholders with a legitimate interest in forestry. In their recent discussion of the new concept of forest certification, Upton and Bass (1995) state that forest certification will take place "by assessing the effects of forest activities against standards previously agreed as significant and acceptable to stakeholders". They earlier suggest that these stakeholders would be "those who live in forests, forest industries, governments, and the public at large - who depend in different ways on the environmental, social and economic benefits provided by forests". It is easy to dismiss such sentiments as referring to the extensive old-growth forests of the Tropics, the Pacific coast of North America, or Russia. However, history already shows that, with very little modification, the concepts apply to Europe, including

the Republic of Ireland and Britain. With regards to Britain, it is interesting to look back only 10 years when, in 1986, the then Nature Conservancy Council published *Nature Conservation and Afforestation in Britain*, in which it called for the re-examination of the objectives of public support for forestry, with a move away from "narrowly timber-orientated" grant schemes. While government made no immediate and decisive response, the entire trend over the ensuing years has been to emphasise the social role of the nation's forests and to slowly restructure the grant scheme so that it can be increasingly regarded as buying public good rather than subsidising private gain. Furthermore, the opportunity for, and transparency of, consultation over award of grants have been greatly increased.

These trends are not isolated developments within Britain, but reflect a much larger international trend that came to its sharpest focus at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) at Rio de Janeiro in June, 1992. The cataclysmic importance of this event is taking some time to dawn on most of us. Yes, the forest debate at this conference was bedevilled by suspicions across the north-south divide. Yes, as a result of these divisions, the Principles on Sustainable Development of Forests were accepted only as a non-legally binding authoritative statement. Nevertheless, the leaders of most nations were present and these leaders signed the statement which, though it did not commit them to action in the forest, did commit them to review and report on their own procedures. A host of regional conferences followed, of which that relevant to European countries was the Helsinki Conference (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 1993). This produced the Helsinki Agreement which was signed by, and does legally commit, European governments, including that of the Republic of Ireland. The Helsinki Agreement was just the start of the 'Helsinki Process'. Since the signing at Helsinki in 1993, meetings have been held in Geneva, Paris and elsewhere to define and develop means of monitoring the commitment to sustainable management and biodiversity. Similar developments, such as the Montreal Process, are taking place for other regions of the world. Meanwhile, on a global scale, developments include the monitoring of the implementation of Agenda 21 by the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development and the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests.

An important point is that Ireland has a legal obligation to abide by the Helsinki guidelines. Put another way, these guidelines are now part of the forest policy of the Republic of Ireland, as they are for other European states. It is therefore necessary to examine these guidelines in a little detail. They call, *inter alia*, for avoidance of damage to sites or ecosystems, for long term land use policies, for a commitment to multiple use management, for particular care of landscapes of cultural, heritage or protective importance, for maintenance of forest health (implying stringent quarantine measures where relevant), for the rejection of afforestation where it negatively impacts on other important ecological features, and for preference for native species and provenances "where appropriate". The latter two clauses may well impact on forest practice in our two countries, while our commitment to multiple use management may still have some way to go.

It is probably with the very term 'multiple use' that we are facing our greatest professional challenges. Whilst we do not have a truly indigenous forest population to worry about, nor do we have to allow for subsistence food collection from the forest, we do have to contend with increasingly vociferous stakeholders from among recreationalists and conservationists (including conservation of landscapes and archaeology as well as fauna

and flora). The Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF) recently brought together recreationalists, conservationists and timber processors to attempt to determine whether they could establish a consensus about the future values and directions for UK forestry. There was surprising goodwill on all sides and it proved to be not too difficult to draw up and agree a UK Forestry Accord (Institute of Chartered Foresters, 1996). In summary, the six main principles are as follows.

- Investment in sustainable forestry of all types should be encouraged.
- Conservation of biodiversity and natural resources should be at the heart of forest management.
- Forest management should safeguard and enhance landscape and heritage resources.
- Sustainable productive forestry to provide timber benefits should be encouraged.
- Research, education and training should cover all aspects of sustainable forestry.
- The public should be widely involved in and consulted on forestry matters.

As with the Helsinki Agreement, this Accord is seen by its sponsors as the start of an ongoing process of discussion and investigation. It entails acceptance that forests should be managed and that timber matters. By implication the skills of the forestry profession are acknowledged, but the forest manager in turn is required to acknowledge the legitimate interest of all stakeholders in the forest, including those outside the timber trade. Professional foresters should consult and respond to such interests and in so doing seek their assistance in improving sustainable management and increasing the biodiversity of forests under their charge.

This then requires examination of these two new, or not so new, imperatives of sustainable management and biodiversity. Taking the latter first, the idea of biodiversity is not difficult to comprehend but impossible to fully define and difficult to monitor. To assess all species present, and the impact of management actions upon them, is beyond the capabilities of science and probably will always be so. The adoption of certain indicative species may be one way forward but brings with it its own dangers. Recently, Ratcliffe (in press) suggested that the only guidance of value is to strive for as near natural conditions as possible within other legitimate restrictions, e.g. timber extraction, enhanced growth rates, etc.

The response of governments to UNCED and Helsinki will bring new legal obligations on forest managers. Initiatives such as the UK Forestry Accord are entered into voluntarily and highlight ethical imperatives. A new force has been the attempt to harness consumer power to enforce sustainable management. The requirements here are laid down in the ten principles and criteria of the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC). These require (i) compliance with all legal demands of the state, (ii) that land tenure is clearly defined and established, (iii) that the rights of indigenous people be fully respected, (iv) that social and economic well-being of forest workers and local communities be maintained and enhanced, (v) that management be based on multiple use, (vi) that biodiversity and ecological functions and integrity be preserved, (vii) that proper management plans be produced and updated as necessary, (viii) that performance and chain of custody be monitored, (ix) that natural forest be protected, and finally, and only recently agreed, (x) that plantations should not replace natural forests but should augment them. This approach brings with it problems in relation to small sized forests, the role of government regulatory authorities, interference with trade, and so on. Putting these aside, however, these

recent developments do illustrate the extent to which society is making new demands and the probable powers it has to see them implemented.

This is a very different scene to that of only five years ago. Suggestions that the demands come from non-representative corners of society are no longer tenable when the most important thrust is through governments implementing the Helsinki Agreement. If our profession cannot take up the challenge, it will be displaced and others will take it up for us.

Responding to the demand

It should first be emphasised that the position is not one of 'them and us'. Foresters have sometimes argued for change, although until recently these have been the unusual individuals. It has been stated elsewhere (e.g. Miller, 1993) that it is not the role of foresters to set national policies or to interpret them into objectives for individual forest enterprises. These functions properly belong to governments and to forest owners, state or private. With their professional skills, foresters will inform these processes and will ultimately have to interpret them into management actions. Over recent years, forest policy at the international level has been handled by diplomats, with senior foresters finding themselves displaced to the advisors' bench. This must be welcomed, as it is a measure of the importance the subject has achieved.

Foresters not unfairly sometimes protest that terms such as 'sustainable management' and 'biodiversity' which seem so exciting in the conference hall are rather harder to focus when deciding on particular management steps in the woods. But this is to misunderstand what is expected of us. The requirement is not to be able to point to a particular square metre and say there is the biodiversity, or to equate yield with increment in order to qualify management as sustainable. Rather, these concepts, for that is all they need to be, are the ethical starting points for our decision making. Restated as a responsibility to the forest and its present and future users and it is no longer difficult to comprehend. Many forestry societies, including the ICF, have already inserted a green clause into their code of ethics. The recently promulgated UK Forestry Accord is a further manifestation of this process.

On the last page of his important book, *Natural Woodland*, Peterken (1996) writes, "Having marginalised themselves from woodland nature conservation for 40 years, the foresters have now moved decisively to centre stage... it seems to me that the prospects are encouraging. The pendulum may swing, but the fulcrum has moved to a more balanced, multiple-use forestry. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with timber growing at a profit, so long as other interests are fully considered. The emerging generation of middle and senior forestry managers undoubtedly espouse a far broader view of forestry than their predecessors". What brought about this change? The pressure from outside the profession, notably from conservationists, was critical, but so too was the willingness among well-placed foresters to listen and respond – surely in the last analysis this is the only useful definition of professionalism. What we were being asked often seemed unattainable but invariably proved to be attainable following sensible discussion.

Peterkin's final sentence is "In the long term, it would be prudent to maintain an active role for conservation organisations within forestry, for a strong independent voice will

periodically be needed to maintain environmental standards against other pressures on forestry". There should also be independent voices speaking up for recreation, archaeology, local communities, timber processing, and so on. To the professional foresters lies the task of balancing all these demands and, in consultation with the owners, drawing up the necessary management strategies.

Shaping the profession

Listening with humility is the start of professionalism. Finding a way to balance all the demands is the rest of it. It is not sufficient that a few leading foresters behave professionally. It is necessary that they all, or at least the vast majority, so behave. In plying our trade we will survive or fall together. It is but a small step to then argue for a professional society or institute that sets standards of entry to the profession, ensures continuing competence in a changing world, and demands adherence to codes of ethics and conduct that protect the forest, the public and the clients.

The first of these issues, that of the standards of entry to the profession, is often thrown back as being the responsibility of the colleges or universities and ultimately the employers of their graduates. Colleges and universities throughout the world are being starved of resources. It is in their interest to be resource-efficient by creating large classes. Forestry departments seldom have a large intake and persist in the luxury of whenever possible teaching their students in classes unique to their degree programmes. Until recently in both Britain and Ireland, this could be justified by making reference to the requirements of the main employer, the state forest service. In both countries, the state is now far from being the largest employer. Furthermore, deregulation and variations of privatisation mean that the state forest service no longer takes a central and guiding role within the profession. There remains a vacuum that must be filled by the forestry profession itself. In Britain, the ICF, through its Part I syllabus, is increasingly coming to dictate the syllabus of forestry programmes in universities and colleges, as do the examination systems of other professions ranging from law and medicine to engineering and surveying.

Dictating standards of entry is not enough. Throughout their careers, professional foresters are expected by their colleagues to keep up with changing technical (and ethical) demands. A programme of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is called for.

Finally, and by no means least, are the standards of behavior professionals can expect from their colleagues. Ethical aspects, such as responsibilities to current and future society, are clearly central, as is the requirement that foresters only practise within their competence. Codes of behavior should also govern the relationship of foresters with their employers (e.g. requirements for professional indemnity), with their colleagues (e.g. advertising should be fair) and with the public.

Given these three strands, i.e. examinations, CPD and codes of ethics and conduct, it is possible to explain to the public and to government bodies, both national and international, what they can expect from professional foresters. Furthermore, and as important, it is possible to ensure that foresters behave professionally by seeking out and responding to the desire and needs of that large and diverse section of the community that can legitimately claim to be stakeholders in the forests and forest policy of Ireland.

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