

Design for Outdoor Recreation

By Simon Bell. 1997. E. & F.N. Spon, London. Paperback. 218 pp. Price Stg£39.95. ISBN 0 419 20350 8.

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Simon Bell is a prolific writer. In addition to this publication, another recent book penned by the author, entitled *Elements of Visual Design in the Landscape*, will be reviewed in a later issue of *Irish Forestry*. A new book, *The Landscape: Pattern, Process and Perception*, is also due to be published shortly. The author – a forester with a qualification in landscape architecture – is the Chief Landscape Architect with the Forestry Commission in Edinburgh. He has travelled extensively, has undertaken research into recreational building design and has been involved in studies on the public's perception of the countryside as a place to visit. He has also advised and trained staff from numerous

forest services and other public bodies throughout Europe (including Ireland), North America and Canada in the areas of recreation and landscape design. This book contains examples from many parts of the world, offering a fresh and up-to-date look at all aspects of the design of facilities required by visitors to outdoor recreational sites. The book will enable managers to find the best balance between their own needs and those of the visitor.

The philosophy and concepts of recreation originated in North America and were subsequently transferred across to Europe. The author quotes John Muir, who wrote over 100 years ago, "thousands of tired, nerve shaken, overcivilised people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity; and that mountain peaks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and invigorating rivers, but as fountains of life". Since then, a much greater number of people are living in the city, with more leisure time and disposable income, a higher life expectancy and access to better transportation systems.

Why should recreational design concern foresters? Outdoor recreation is on the increase world-wide, and forests on these islands are now subjected to tremendous levels of use by the public. The author points out that uses change over time. For example, recreational sites in Ireland were initially designed with short walks in mind. Today, however, there is a growing trend towards long distance walking. Such walks require different design techniques and facilities which must be considered at the onset.

The majority of people in the developed world live in urban areas. They yearn for outdoor recreation to escape from the stresses and strains of city life. There are very few environments where one can get away to in today's world. Forests are one such environment. They are robust ecosystems which can absorb large numbers of people without compromising their inherent attractiveness, and are very often the only natural areas within easy reach from large centres of population.

Providing facilities for visitors is by no means a simple matter. This book, fully illustrated with sketches, diagrams and photographs, many in colour, taken from a wide range of locations in Ireland, UK, Europe, North America and elsewhere, provides a manual on the best practices available throughout the world. It takes the reader through the process of looking after the visitor right from the moment of arrival, with a section on signage and visitor information. The reader is instructed on the correct layout of parking and toilet facilities, picnic sites, children's play areas and nature trails. How to properly provide for visitors is a specialised, complex and sometimes formidable area, particularly among managers who also have responsibilities for other aspects of the overall enterprise, such as, in the case of the forester, the supply of timber. Having at hand a comprehensive and accessible manual dedicated to the subject will prove invaluable to such individuals.

This publication also removes the current uncertainty regarding what is right and what is wrong for an area. For example, there is a huge variety in the availability of picnic tables, even within these islands. With the ever-increasing danger of claims for damages, it is important that furniture and other man-made features are of a certain standard. Such standards are clearly set out in this book.

One area of recreational design which managers must consider is that of personal safety. Efforts should be made, for example, to minimise dark and secluded trails, given that they can lead to feelings of insecurity and even a fear of attack in men and women alike. Such routes are also dull from the design viewpoint, and should be opened up to

provide greater diversity and interest. The author suggests that the fear of attack may be the result of an exaggerated assessment of the risk, or that it may in fact go deeper, originating from feelings arising from long-established cultural associations with forests expressed in legends and fairy tales such as Little Red Riding Hood. Perhaps we have had some of our natural instincts for survival bred or tamed out of us, and like pet rabbits set loose, we are unable to cope with freedom.

Forestry is unusual in that the number of people directly involved in the industry is very small, while the number of people who have used forests for recreation at some point in their lives is very large. The quality and presentation of recreational facilities can have a major influence on how the public perceive forestry – poorly maintained sites and facilities send out the wrong signal, while properly maintained sites engender a positive impression.

Overall, *Design for Outdoor Recreation*, described by the author as a manual, will be indispensable to anyone involved in the provision of facilities for visitors, including foresters, conservation bodies and local authorities, as well as those involved in new recreational developments within the private sector. The book also provides a useful guide to the refurbishment of existing facilities and sites – an activity becoming more and more commonplace, given that many of our recreational sites have been in use for over 25 years. *Design for Outdoor Recreation* is a timely publication which will undoubtedly stimulate the reader to consider the needs of visitors. Addressing such needs will ensure a more rewarding experience for visitors to our forests, and by virtue of that, a more positive outlook of forestry among the public at large.