

Report on the Society of Irish Foresters Annual Study Tour to Poland, 1995

In 1995, the Society of Irish Foresters took their annual study tour to Poland. The tour concentrated on the east and south east, in particular, the Bialowieza National Park, the forests of the Roztocze Uplands, and the eastern Carpathians. The 48 tour participants represented all sectors of Irish forestry, from nurseries to sawmills.

The tour party arrived in Warsaw airport on Saturday, 9th September and quickly got a flavour of Polish life. Poland is a culture shock for most western visitors. As the tour bus made its way through the vast plain of Mazovia to the town of Hajnowka, men and women worked side-by-side in the fields digging potatoes, with horses, ploughs and carts outnumbering tractors and other farm machinery. For all that, Poland has none of the food shortages that other former Communist countries are experiencing, probably due to its refusal to adopt the Communist system of collective farms. Unlike other eastern block countries, over 80% of Polish farms remained in the hands of individual farmers throughout the Communist regime.

It is easy to be critical of Poland's lack of progress. It is, however, worth remembering that the country has had to endure much in the recent past, including the loss of six million lives during World War II and almost 50 years of Soviet control. Only five years ago Poland finally managed to shake off the stranglehold of Communism, which left the country with major problems including pollution, huge inflation and a \$40 billion debt.

While the first impression is of a country caught in a 1940s time warp, the second – from a forestry perspective – is more positive. Poland has a huge forest resource by Irish standards (Table 1). Polish forests are well stocked and have a varied range of species. The common theme running throughout the tour was the priority placed on conservation.

Table 1: *Some comparisons between Polish and Irish forestry.*

	<i>Poland</i>	<i>Ireland</i>
Total area of forests (million ha)	8.7	0.5
Forest cover (%)	28	8
Average age of forests (years)	54	30
Total forestry employment	350,000	13,000
Ownership (%)		
State	83	80
Private	17	20
Annual harvesting (million m ³)	20.6	2.2
Average volume/ha harvested (m ³)	2.4	4.4
Annual average growth/ha (m ³)	3.4	16.0
Species distribution (%)		
Conifers	78	90
Broadleaves	22	10

In Bialowieza, all forest areas are protected, either fully or partially. In fully protected areas, no harvesting or replanting takes place. In partially protected areas, felling is only permitted in the case of damaged and windblown trees, and reforestation only where the objective is to shift the balance of species from conifers to broadleaves. Irish foresters might regard this treatment as being far too extreme, but Polish foresters and environmentalists are all too well aware of threats to their forests. These include insect pests and fungal damage, fire and pollution. For example, fire caused 37,000 ha of damage in 1992, while the nun moth (*Lymantria monacha*) affected over one-third of Poland's forests from 1978 to 1992. A more sinister threat is that posed by pollution. While a problem all over the country, the greatest threat is in the south western region known as the Black Triangle, where Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany meet. A quarter of Poland's forests are now classified as ecological hazard areas.

The Bialowieza has so far escaped the worst effects of pollution. The forest, impressive by any standards, comprises oak (*Quercus* spp.) (some more than 500 years old), birch (*Betula* spp.), hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus* L.), aspen (*Populus tremula* L.), Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris* L.) and Norway spruce (*Picea abies* (L.) Karst.), which is capable of growing to over 50 m in height. A wildlife conservation programme is part of the overall conservation strategy. Over 120 species of birds are represented, while the list of mammals include elk, roe deer, wolf, wild boar, lynx and bison. Originally wiped out in 1916, the bison was reintroduced in 1926, and today there are over 240 in Bialowieza. The Poles experience the same problems with deer damage as we do in Ireland. They have tried using repellents to control roe deer, with little success. They also plant maple (*Acer* spp.) through oak to act as a distraction, with some success. Like Irish counterparts, however, Polish foresters have resorted to culling as the most effective way of dealing with the problem.

The biggest contrast with Irish forests is in species distribution. Unlike Ireland, only native species are planted. Conifers, including Scots pine, larch (*Larix* spp.), Norway spruce and fir (*Abies* spp.), comprise 78% of species, with the 22% broadleaf proportion including mainly oak, sycamore (*A. pseudoplatanus* L.), beech (*Fagus sylvatica* L.), birch, alder (*Alnus* spp.), hornbeam, aspen and lime (*Tilia* spp.). Large scale clearfells are opposed by both the public and the environmentalists. Instead, foresters lay a series of patch fellings, each less than a hectare in size. These are either restocked by natural regeneration or manual planting. A few years ago during the Society's study tour to Oregon, US foresters could not understand why Irish stocking levels at 2,500 trees/ha were so high, compared to their own figure of 1,000 plants/ha. Let's hope they never visit Poland, where initial stocking rates are as high as 17,000 plants/ha. The end result after 140 years is straight, self-pruning forest stands which greatly impressed the sawmillers in the tour group but which left the accompanying accountants in a state of near apoplexy! It was estimated that it would take one worker 12 weeks to plant a hectare, given the average planting rates of 270 plants/day.

Approximately 20% of Polish forests are privately owned. The group visited a private forest in Parczew where there is no harvesting control. The forest is overexploited in marked contrast to the adjoining State forest.

Probably the most interesting part of the tour took place in Bieszczady in the Eastern Carpathians. This area was populated up until relatively recently by two ethnic groups known as the Bojkowie and Lemkowie, both descendants of nomadic tribes. These groups were caught up in a civil war in the aftermath of World War II and all but 20,000 of the 300,000 population were deported within a few days. The area has an eerie feeling which

is compounded by the ruined farmhouses, wild meadow land and deserted wooded churches which dot the countryside. From our base in the village of Ustrzyki Gorne, we visited the Ukranian border and one of the many charcoal burners located throughout this region. Here the workers produce charcoal in near primitive conditions for a weekly wage of approximately £20.

The group saw no harvesting on the tour, mainly due to the fact that timber extraction is confined to winter months in many of Poland's forests, when the frozen underfoot conditions make for better extraction conditions and less site damage. In Bieszczady, many areas are not harvested, due to the difficult terrain. As a result, virgin stands of beech, sycamore and fir still remain.

Poles have a strong sense of history. Our guides spoke about World War II as if it was only yesterday, and about Stalinisation as if it still prevailed. Despite this preoccupation with the past, Poland has emerged as a politically stable country without any of the internal problems that have plagued many other former Communist Bloc countries. Its economic development is slow, but the Polish respect for its heritage is ensuring that the protection of its forest resource is in safe hands.

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