

Policy Paper on Forestry and the National Heritage

The Heritage Council, Kilkenny, Ireland. 1999. ISBN 1-901137-08-2. 64 pages. IR£7.00.

Reviewed by Patrick Purser.

This policy paper on forestry and the national heritage should be read by all foresters currently practising in Ireland. It is only on reading it that the enormity of the task of trust-building between the forestry profession and others becomes apparent. It is obvious from this document that the Heritage Council has little trust in the forestry profession. Its authors may be surprised to learn that, probably without exception, foresters regard themselves as lovers of the countryside, as custodians of our national heritage, as upholders of all that is best in rural development, and as a profession doing something positive for both the environment and rural socio-economics. But somehow, if this policy paper is anything to go by, we have convinced nobody of this. The forestry profession, as such, is not mentioned once in the document.

First impressions are that the Heritage Council seems deeply dissatisfied with current forestry policy. If we can swallow our pride and be open-minded as we read the document, we will, however, discover that much of what is recommended is currently observed by practising foresters and is actually happening on the ground. Indeed, this is one fault with the document. Too often, it criticises forestry practices which are already history. Due to the long-term nature of forestry, many of today's criticisms are manifestations of past policies. The Heritage Council makes no recognition of this.

There appears to be no regard anywhere in the document for economics. This needs to be addressed by the Heritage Council in a follow-up document. What will be the economic effect of the adoption of their recommendations? It would seem clear that, if all the recommendations were to be followed, the commercial mandate currently given to Irish foresters would have to be removed in favour of a socio-environmental one. Given that most of the current forestry developments are being carried out by farmers, and are set to continue as such, the Heritage Council must cost their proposals and identify where the funds for their implementation are to be found.

Many of the recommendations in the policy paper seem to have little technical basis.

Due to the lack of supporting references, there is an impression that many of these are borne out of 'gut feelings' rather than any objective research. There is frequent reference to the need for balance in forestry policy between such things as biological diversity and commercial objectives, coniferous and broadleaf species, etc. One wonders if the recommendation "that Ireland's forestry policy adopt a strategic planting target of 1:1 broadleaved species to conifer species" is based on an assessment of suitable and available sites, or simply out of a sense of fairness to competing interests.

It would be wrong, however, to continue this review in a negative manner. The policy paper is an honest and, in many places, enterprising document which clearly outlines the Heritage Council's position on forestry. There are many recommendations to be welcomed, particularly in the area of broadleaf management. These include: "that Ireland's forestry policy should encourage use of local Irish seed"; "that substantial research and education effort be directed at developing broadleaved tree management and silvicultural skills amongst forestry owners"; and "that a complete inventory of the remaining areas of semi-natural woodland in Ireland is undertaken, and their active management and conservation is promoted". There is also a call for the abolishment of the requirement to replant as a pre-condition for a felling licence, and for greater liaison between forestry bodies and other interests, such as archaeologists, ecologists and County Councils.

To date, foresters have been defensive rather than inclusive about their contribution to rural Ireland. Our involvement has been positive, but we will continue to convince nobody of this unless we allow other interests to share in the planning and implementation of forestry developments. Now is the time for trustful and open-minded communication to commence between foresters and other professions and interests, starting with the Heritage Council.