

EDITORIAL

Forest certification schemes are now in place in a number of countries – the Forest Stewardship Council has recently certified both Forestry Commission and Northern Ireland Forest Service forests. In the Republic, certification is on the way. The objective of certification schemes is to independently verify that sustainable forest management is taking place and to establish a chain of custody for forest products from producer to consumer.

Forest certification has its origin in the desire of ENGOs to promote sustainable forest management in tropical and sub tropical forests. Forests in these regions have been overexploited for decades. Certification was seen as a means to promote sustainable forest management, through creating a demand for certified wood. While there have been some success stories these efforts have largely failed to halt the tide. In the meantime, the certification focus has shifted to the temperate and boreal forests of Europe and North America.

When certification was first proposed the reaction of foresters and forest owners alike was generally hostile. As the author of the paper in this journal asks, “why certification?” We did not need the imprimatur of a third party to tell us we were doing a good job. We had been practising sustained yield and careful resource management since the beginning of the 20th century. Unlike the tropics, forest cover was steadily increasing. Our forests were well managed and sustainable. However, forest products are traded internationally, in a highly competitive market. There was a market segment that wanted forest products and the forests from which they came to be certified by independent third parties. If the market demanded certified wood we had little choice but to respond.

But is it as simple as that? The market for certified forest products is difficult to measure. Certainly there is little or no evidence that certified forest products will command a higher price. Certification costs money, a cost that the grower will naturally try to recoup and pass down the chain. If this results in more expensive forest products then market share could be lost to competing materials such as steel and concrete – materials that are far more damaging to the environment in their manufacture than the equivalent wood products. There is also the danger of a proliferation of certification schemes, which may confuse the customer, leading to an erosion of confidence and lack of trust on the part of the consumer.

Despite these factors there has been a gradual change in attitude among foresters and woodland owners to certification. There is a realisation that the current schemes foster local involvement in the development of certification standards. They bring together growers, environmentalists and local communities. All current schemes favour the development of country-based standards that take into account national legislation, standards, and codes of practice, within the framework of sustainable forest management. The emphasis is on public consultation and continuous improvement. Forest management is taken in the broad sense, to include all forest functions.

Certification has the potential to play a powerful role in promoting the use of wood and wood products. However, it should not become an end in itself, or a development that will disadvantage the very entity it seeks to foster – sustainable forest management.

Submissions to *Irish Forestry* are welcomed and will be considered for publication. The attention of contributors is drawn to “Guidelines for Submissions”.

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