PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY B BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

Land Use and Rural Planning [and Discussion]

G. Wibberley, D. R. Johnston and K. N. Rankin

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Land use and rural planning

By G. Wibberley
Wye College and University College, London University

As trees seem to be objects of hate as well as of love in the British landscape, this paper attempts to assess the place of forestry in the tangled pattern of British land uses. Both the weaknesses and the strengths of forestry as an important use of land are examined in the light of past events and analyses and as assessed by earlier speakers in the Discussion Meeting. This involves a consideration of existing and future conflict and cooperation between economic, social and amenity aspects of forestry and between private and public interests. The long period of time involved in the production of a mature tree makes it a flow resource of some complexity, particularly in relation to government policy and taxation.

Perhaps I am not so committed to the interests of forestry as earlier speakers have been or, as I suspect, are most of the members of this audience. I see forestry only as one component of the British landscape and of the rural resources of this country. I want forestry to play its right place in this mix and I know it is just one part of a greater whole which includes a progressive and prosperous agriculture, a strong development of facilities for outdoor recreation, improved water storage and distribution, a richer mix of natural fauna and flora (both in reserves and throughout the countryside), thriving and balanced rural communities and settlements and a wide provision of employment for rural people of all ages and interests. If forestry development goes ahead too fast in some areas to the detriment of these other resources and opportunities, then I, as a professor of countryside planning, must be full of disapproval. If, on the other hand, forestry contributes real wealth, jobs, beauty and improvement in natural fauna and flora and more recreation, then I am sure I will smile in approval. Again, I think it is right for a person like myself to look critically at the balance of forestry flowing from private interests as against the State sector, in that I will want fair play in relation to what the tax-payer has to contribute to support State forestry and that contributions from the tax-payer to private forestry groups should secure adequate returns both in the present and in the future to society as a whole. I like private people to flourish in wealth and importance *only* if this is accompanied by improved conditions for other people around them.

I have been tempted to compose this lecture in such a way that I deal with the least controversial aspects of the development of forestry in Great Britain first and then touch the more difficult ones later. But perhaps this is being very timid and it might be more helpful at this late stage of the Conference to dive right in to the most emotional and controversial part of the subject. So let me start discussing whether or not there ought to be normal planning control of forestry in this country, i.e. that major afforestation or deforestation should come under Town and Country Planning legislation and administration.

I am not surprised that foresters react against this proposal because, when one poses the same question to individuals or groups of farmers, they also react in the same way. The primary producers of rural Britain, i.e. the farmers and foresters, though they receive support from

society in general, either through price control and/or grants and subsidies, so that their incomes are at least relatively in line with the incomes of other sections of the community, vastly prefer this help to come with no strings attached. In other words, they want to be left alone to handle the rural land surface in the way that suits *their* interests and which conforms to *their* standards. Both foresters and farmers are sensitive to landscape in that they know what looks nice to them. Their standards, however, are usually those of neatness and high productivity. Natural fauna and flora which interferes with this productivity are classed as vermin or weeds and the regimentation of landscape which often occurs through the pursuit of high productivity is not considered bad as it often is by other groups who use the countryside but are not part of it as producers. Foresters, like farmers, must now accept that they have to produce and live in a countryside which is heavily used by other people from the cities and that more and more people are becoming critical as to both the use and the appearance of this countryside. The days have long past when potential critics of rural land use were penned up in the city and the town because of low incomes and poor means of travel.

In many ways forestry interests themselves have moved into a situation where they have increased the potential criticism of their practices. They have, in their pressure on Government and in their national statements, made it quite clear that they accept that their present and future role should be a combination of things rather than the mere production of the maximum quantity of saleable timber. For State aid in many forms they promise to provide greater recreational opportunities, a much more satisfactory landscape in terms of type of tree and pattern of planting and a real contribution to the provision of new jobs in the more remote rural regions. Surely if the role of forestry in Britain changes towards a greater emphasis on landscape, amenity, regional employment and outdoor recreation then it should move closer to other uses of the land surface in its integration within the land use planning system of Britain. At the moment the potential clash of interests is strong in that forestry, like agriculture, seems to want the maximum in relation to tax concessions and State assistance with the minimum of controls on land use or integration in the land use planning system. It is hard for foresters, like agriculturalists, to accept this integrated role because most of the leading people in these industries are technically trained in such a way that the biological and husbandry aspects of the tree, the animal and the plant have dominated their early thinking. An awareness and understanding of multiple and linked land uses and of human and social aspirations and demands has usually come late in their experience so that they find it hard to accept that outside organizations or individuals should have a dominant say in the way they use the land surface under their control.

Forestry, like agriculture, has historically been exempt from planning control because the growing of primary products such as timber, like food, has been thought of as a traditional or natural use of the land. Again, timber has been thought of as a strategic resource, a use of rural land which replaces expensive imports. There are many technical and economic implications in decisions about when to fell trees and when to plant or replace them and these decisions have, traditionally, been regulated either by owners of land or by people technically trained in forestry matters.

But foresters cannot expect to change the terms under which they receive encouragement and help from the State without accepting the controls and guidance which the State asks from other interests in a similar position. The provision of new jobs in a remote rural area is not best decided by people with forestry experience. The provision of more facilities for outdoor recreation should not be decided by foresters. The effects of planting and felling on the land-

PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY B BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

scape are not matters on which foresters are the best, or the only, judges. Most other resource developments, such as the provision of new industrial jobs, the creation of a country park or the layout of a new industrial estate, are matters which are not left in the hands of the primary industry concerned. They also involve the point of view of representatives of the local and regional community who have to live with any mistakes and with the benefits of the kind of industrial development which is proposed. Do people in forestry think that these arguments are not applicable to large-scale tree planting which have employment, amenity and recreational consequences?

Of course, I am over exaggerating the reluctance of forestry interests to become part of the integrated land planning process. I know that there is agreement both between Government and forestry interests that these larger issues of employment, amenity and recreation need some type of regional advisory organizations; but the regional organizations proposed are going to be new ones specially created for advising forestry authorities, and they are not the normal regional and local authorities constituted for all other planning matters.

I know that forestry interests oppose becoming part of the land use planning machine for the same reasons as farmers oppose their activities being regulated by the same bodies. The opposition is largely based on the fear that planning will, in practice, be controlled by persons without knowledge of technical and economic forestry considerations. For example, some foolish decisions in the past relating to tree preservation orders are being used as a constant reminder that planning authorities can sometimes be inadequate in relation to organic problems of timber and food production. But surely forestry interests should break away from such memories and fears as these are far removed from the realities of major development proposals like housing, roads, commercial establishments and new factories which have to be looked at and agreed in the general planning context of their area. All of these developments have as many technical and economic considerations as do forestry and farming and yet as we have had many years of successful experience whereby these developments have been successfully steered and encouraged by local and national planning authorities. The time surely has come for forestry interests to be asked to prove why they should be the exception rather than the rule.

The evaluation of forestry as against other uses of land

As soon as I use a word like 'evaluation' I expect many of you will think with a shudder of the words 'cost/benefit analysis' and remember the 1972 Treasury effort in this direction and the storm of comment and criticism which this study has met. The first thing to say is that some type of critical assessment must be continually used in relation to a resource like forestry which is making a request for a sizeable share of the land resources of Britain and which is asking for help from the general tax-payer for its continuance and encouragement. Any resource which expects these benefits should expect an evaluation of its progress and success or failure. With forestry we have to accept the fact that it will only provide about 8 % of our total needs of wood products as overall demand is increasing as fast as total home supplies. The problem will, therefore, always remain as to whether we should have relatively more, or relatively less, home grown timber.

Many studies have shown that commercial afforestation in the long term produces a return on capital invested in it of something between 3 and 7 %. This percentage figure has varied up and down over the last 30 years and, though the 1972 Treasury analysis put it at about $3\frac{1}{2}$ %, it is probably nearer to $4\frac{1}{2}$–5 % now because of the rise in the value of home grown

timber since the middle of 1972 (though the effect of this rise is heavily discounted by the accompanying rise in the opportunity costs of land being used for new tree plantings). Many persons and organizations have critized the 1972 Treasury cost/benefit analysis though most of them have accepted that this type of evaluation is valuable because it makes everyone think hard about all the elements which are for, or against, the extension of forestry in this country. I have, in particular, appreciated the Wolfe–Gaborn study which was commissioned by the Forestry Committee of Great Britain and published in April 1973. The authors queried, quite rightly, the Treasury use of a 10% discount rate as a measuring rod and emphasized that it is the opportunity cost of land in other long term rural land uses which is important. Though it is emphasized that more research and more information would make a more complete type of cost/benefit analysis possible yet most of us in this room would accept that this type of analysis only takes us so far when dealing with a resource which has a very long time period between inception and final use. In their report the two authors suggest that forestry in its new multi-purpose role should have a three-fold grant system, i.e.

(1) grants for improving the amenities of the forest depending on the type of tree used and the location of the forest;

(2) grants for planting and replanting;

(3) grants towards the provision of recreational facilities, e.g. scenic roads, footpaths, nature trails, camp sites.

They suggest that the planting and replanting grants and those for amenity purposes should be paid and administered by a forest authority, whereas the grants for recreational facilities should be administered and paid by the relevant Countryside Commission. I would accept as useful this division into a triple purpose grant scheme but the major decision about new plantings with those potential multiple uses ought to be in the hands of the regional planning authority and the Department of the Environment in the last instance.

Private as against State forestry

Most of us would probably agree that the best way forward in forest policy in this country, as in many others, is to continue with an amalgam of both private and State interests and development in forestry. The one can help the other and both can be used as a check or a stimulus. In this country the Forestry Commission, for example, has played a major role in encouraging and stimulating improved forestry practices and it has kept the industry buoyant at times when private interests have found the financial climate in forestry rather chilly. The Forestry Commission has acted as a reservoir of research findings, of technical expertise and of trained staff from which private forestry interests can draw. In addition, the Forestry Commission can be asked by the various Governments of the day to change its policies according to the political opinion of the day. For example, thinking has, in general, moved towards an increase of recreational, wildlife and amenity consideration in both afforestation and forest management and the Forestry Commission has been asked to put this into practice.

The major problem here is the role of private forestry groups, as operating as they do in the free market for land, they can only buy what is on offer. Once having bought, however, they are free agents in the allocation of their land purchase as between planting up with trees and the continued use of the better land for agriculture. In contrast the Forestry Commission has had to clear its land purchases with the Ministry of Agriculture and this has resulted in the Forestry Commission being left with land for planting which has little agricultural value.

PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY B BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

In relation to the wider non-forestry aspects of forestry policy such as outdoor recreation, landscape enhancement and improved local employment, the advantages do not necessarily lie with private forestry interests. In practice they cannot be directed to buy land in the areas of greatest employment need. There would also have to be quite strong planning control if private forestry interests in their planting schemes were compelled to provide recreational opportunities and to work to a specific landscape plan. Again, many people would believe that planning interference had gone too far if the owners of mature, private woodlands were told that they had to open them up to the general public and to lay them out for picnic and other recreational uses. It seems, therefore, that even though private forestry groups, together with the Forestry Commission, accept the widening of the brief in forestry development to cover employment need, recreational development and landscape improvement, in practice only the Forestry Commission will be able to put this new policy into practice easily. We shall have to find suitable sticks and carrots which will persuade private operators to carry out such a comprehensive policy on their own woodlands and this means that grant aid to private forestry should be linked with practical plans approved by some outside agency. This agency could well be the Countryside Commissions but these Commissions operate through local authorities.

Let me end on two notes of personal uncertainty. It may be that, in pressing for forestry to become part of the needed recreational development in the British countryside, we are really asking for inefficient and unsatisfactory recreational development. It could well be that a well thought out policy of country parks would make a much better recreational provision for a region than an insistence that old and young forests should have strong recreational components. After all, recreation and forests are not particularly complementary in Britain, particularly if the main emphasis in the forest is on commercial timber. The wildlife component of such a forest is not particularly varied or particularly attractive, and country park development which is not so closely allied to trees could well establish and maintain a more attractive wildlife element. In addition, commercial forests in this country, found as they so often are, on the wet, cold, clay soils of the uplands and in areas of fairly high rainfall and much low cloud and little sun, are not particularly attractive places into which holiday-makers want to rush. They can be dank, cheerless places for much of the year and it is only on the very edges and in the forest glades that people will want to spend much time. This is such a contrast to many parts of North America and the Continent of Europe where, in many days throughout long summers, the forests are attractive havens into which the visitor likes to go in order to escape the heat and the sun of the open countryside.

We may also be wise to doubt the contribution which forestry development can make to rural employment in the more remote areas of this country. Forestry, like agriculture, has consistently reduced its employment of people through the increase of mechanization and the use of casual labour and moveable gangs. It might be more efficient if some of the resources devoted to afforestation in rural areas were diverted to the increased stimulation of new and old rural industries located in the villages and small market towns of such areas. Are we certain that any new employment provided would be less economic if more resources were given to the Development Commission and to the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas and its Scottish equivalent, rather than to the Forestry Commission and to private forestry interests? I know of no comparative studies which have been made to answer a question such as this. But it is, I hope, a fair question to ask towards the end of a two-day symposium on forests and forest policy.

PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY B BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

Discussion

D. R. Johnston (*Forest Research Station, Farnham, Surrey*)

As a state forester I found Professor Wibberley's paper clear and logical but not very controversial. Most foresters would now agree that in a rapidly changing society forest policies need to be reviewed at frequent intervals. If they are not, forestry is liable to get out of step with society. There is also a widespread recognition that foresters need to collaborate closely with various other interests such as local authority planners, recreational bodies, conservationists and farming interests in developing and implementing their multi-objective strategies. The area of controversy is not so much what collaboration is needed but rather how it should be achieved. The Government has decided to extend the scope of the existing Regional Advisory Committees, on which are presented all the principal interests, to advise the Forestry Commission in its planning and operational roles. Moreover, the Commission will be operating within the framework of regional or structure plans which will be the responsibility of the local authorities. It is too early therefore to say that the proposed system is inadequate or ineffective.

K. N. Rankin (*Economic Forestry Group, Hillgate House, 26 Old Bailey, London, E.C.4*)

(1) Does forestry contribute to wealth?

The contribution to National Economy must be related to the output of the wood processing industries rather than the raw material output of the forest. The 1971 market demand was valued at £1319 million, since when prices have doubled. The current market demand is thus more than £2500 million annually as to which the home industry produces around 42% by value, or 31% by volume. Imports thus cost around £5 million every working day.

Viewed as a whole industry, forests and forest industries well contribute a 10% return on capital employed as required by the Treasury.

(2) The private forestry groups

The Economic Forestry Group has 20000 ha under management in southeast England, all replanted in the last 20 years, all now mixed plantations, and with access for the public through membership of the Countryside Club. All these woodlands now contribute to their beauty of the landscape. The forestry groups were ahead of their time in application of a multi-land-use policy, and can thus be trusted to do the right thing by the community, without bureaucratic direction of a planning authority.

(3) Private and State forestry

Private and State forestry worked together as a happy partnership, and these would be a contribution of 50% by each side in the development of the industry.

(4) Rural employment

Employment, mainly in Scotland, Wales and Northern England would be for not less than 80000 men by the turn of the century. This would be in the Forest, in transport, in industry and in sales and administration.

PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY B BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES