FOREST POLICIES AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN ENGLAND

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Forest Policies and Social Change in England

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Cover illustration: New social uses for the woods. Photograph by Sylvie Nail.

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*In memory of Pam Jackson, the dearest of friends,
always with me.*

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Introduction

Forests lie at the heart of intersecting topical issues at the beginning of the third millennium. With the advent of the post-industrial, post-productivist era in many countries of the Western world, the forestry sector has undergone dramatic changes. For instance in England, the price of timber decreased dramatically in the late 1990s, but indirect market benefits and non-market benefits, including recreation, health and regeneration, have grown. These now loom large in the equation of forest profitability.

One of these benefits relates to a wider international agenda, that of the preservation of biodiversity, which has important consequences in terms of management policies and practices. Traditional resource management has led to criticisms and to forestry practices being questioned over the last decades, while sustainable ecosystem-based forest management has developed. What Kennedy et al. describe as the transition from a machine model to an organic model, hinging on relationships [Kennedy et al. 1998], has led to another characteristic, the inclusion of the socio-cultural environment of forestry.

What follows from this is two-fold. First, forests are now perceived as cultural landscapes, that is to say intentional as well as unintentional expressions of history, environment and cultural identity combined. These social constructions reflect the values of society, understood as contingent concepts of worth informed by 'ethical and moral judgements' [O'Brien 2003: 5]. Conversely, forests feed societies' dreams, myths and memories. The second corollary is the widening of the forestry agenda to include such social issues as the fight against social deprivation and exclusion, especially in urban areas. Indeed, urbanisation has been a driving force, not only in Europe, but also in developing countries, as the subtitle of the UN World Environment Day 2005, held in San Francisco, emphasised: 'Green Cities: where the future lives'. Forestry in urban areas, a recent development as will be seen, has undoubtedly become a way of delivering sustainable development: international projects exemplify this strategic approach to urban forestry in Europe.

All in all, the stakes have become increasingly complex with the advent of multi-purpose forestry.

These issues, together with the rise of new academic disciplines (environmental history, landscape ecology, cultural geography, environmental psychology, among them), have led to copious research in relation to wooded landscapes in many

countries, focusing on history, politics, aesthetics, biodiversity, cultural meanings, recreational functions or economic value. More often than not, however, such aspects are dealt with in isolation, cut off from one another.

Similarly, urban and rural issues are often dealt with separately, which in many cases is no longer relevant. Forests, like any other landscape, are more than the sum of their parts, and their analysis must be based on both their material forms and on the economic and ideological context in which they were construed. Policies and perceptions are frequently dealt with in different books, written by specialists of different disciplines, and the connection between the two is lost. Yet, in order to understand the applications and implications of policies, it is imperative, not only to address economics, leisure, heritage and symbolism, but to address them jointly so as to see how they interact, in order to form a picture of the place forests occupy, physically and symbolically, today. Interactions are fundamental, and policies can fail if they do not take perceptions into account.

The main thrust of this book is thus to explore the multifarious uses, functions and values of forests, whether rural, peri-urban or urban, at the beginning of the 21st century in England. This entails, first, analysing British governments' responses,¹ in so far as values underlie public policies and determine to a certain extent the means deemed most appropriate to reach the public good. It also entails relating these courses of action to social change, that is, to the transformations in the functioning, structure and culture of society in England.

International agreements and European policies obviously frame British policies and influence perceptions to a certain extent. They are presented whenever relevant, as well as examples of initiatives in other countries. Yet, it is argued that England offers a particularly relevant illustration of the issues mentioned above, and of original policies implemented to respond to the new challenges of forestry today.

The definition of woodland in the UK is slightly different from that in other countries. It refers to land under stands of trees with a canopy cover of, or the potential to reach, at least 20%, but with no minimum height to form a mature woodland, whereas the international definition is based on a 10% canopy cover and a minimum height of 5 metres at maturity. There is no precise definition of 'forest' in the UK, and no minimum size, either (although statistics sometimes make a distinction between woodlands of more than 2 hectares and those of less than 2 hectares). As will be shown, the term 'forest' has been used with different meanings over the centuries; today, it tends to be associated mostly, but not exclusively, with large planted areas. Forests and woodlands are part and parcel of the English culture and identity, strongly marked by class and power relationships throughout history. As such, they are invaluable elements of analysis of the English society. Furthermore, England is at the leading edge of urban and social forestry on the international scene.

¹Until the devolution process of the late 1990s, which is explained in Chapter 3, the Forestry Commission operated at the level of Great Britain (i.e. England, Scotland and Wales), hence the need to analyse forest policies at the British level.

In 2007, English woodlands covered 1.124.000 hectares, that is to say 8.6% of the total land area, a smaller percentage of the land than in most other European countries [Forestry Commission 2007: table 1.2]. Yet, they have over the last 15 years become the objects of an amazing array of initiatives, programmes, grant schemes and, more than anything else, of copious discourse on their value and multiple benefits. This attention bears no relation to their modest contribution to the national economy, which raises the question of their real missions, material and symbolical. England therefore offers a privileged environment in which to observe how perceptions shape policies, and conversely how policies can modify perceptions, as well as how both are grafted onto to the national cultural heritage.

Public policies such as the *England Forestry Strategy* (1998) jointly address all the issues related to woodland. The purpose of this book is to deal jointly with all these topics, too, through a social sciences perspective, in order to assess public policies in relation to people's perceptions of woodlands, and to show, in a mirror effect, the place and value of woodland and what these reveal of the English society in the 21st century, of its problems, aspirations and vision of itself. It makes use of existing literature and of the numerous reports on multifarious aspects of English woodland. More than anything else, it is based on a close scrutiny of official publications and abundant fieldwork with numerous interviews.

Through this book, it is hoped to contribute to improving the knowledge of issues which may be peripheral to arboricultural and forestry practices, but are felt by professionals working in these fields, especially in urban forestry, to be lacking from their training. The readers may include specialists of public policies in relation to open spaces and (urban) forests, including those who devise and implement them (among them professionals of arboriculture), as well as social science researchers, human geographers and forest historians. The book is also intended as a resource to higher education, hoping that students of forestry/arboriculture, landscape architecture, ecology, environmental studies and urban/rural planning will find in it tools to reflect on practices. Because England is a leader in the field of urban and social forestry, this research may be of interest to academics and practitioners in other countries, too. The wide public of tree-lovers will hopefully find here fresh insight into the stakes behind tree policies.

The thematic organisation of the book reflects its wide-ranging scope.

The preliminary chapter is designed to provide the historical landmarks in the woodland history of England, i.e. the background necessary to understand the present situation. It constitutes the starting-point of the questioning on the roles and functions of today's woodland. It reviews the main characteristics of English woodland through time, so as to enhance the political, economic, social and cultural traits indispensable to an understanding and assessment of present trends: the natural data, the links of woodland with political power and the traditional economic and symbolical functions of woodland in pre-industrial England. Furthermore, it illustrates the two basic principles that underlie forestry throughout history: in order for woodlands to exist, there has to be no better use of the land, and forestry has to be profitable. This raises the question which informs the whole book: what is the rationale of woodland today? Do the old criteria still exist? If so, are they still valid, or are they present in a different form?

The first part focuses on the institutionalisation of forestry since 1919, a turning-point in the destiny of forests and woodlands through the creation of the Forestry Commission. A lot has been written on the first 50 years of the Forestry Commission, and this chapter avoids repeating previous publications on the subject. Rather, it wants to attract attention to some characteristics which were dogma for several decades, not only in Britain but also on the international scene, and have shaped today's forestry, for example in terms of landscapes and economics. The chapter then explores the changes in emphasis following the economic failure of British forestry and presents the contents and impacts of institutional changes, within the Forestry Commission and also in the UK at large, due to devolution at the end of the 20th century. It also presents the new focus of public policies through an analysis of the 1998 *England Forestry Strategy*.

The next chapter demonstrates how today's new forestry paradigm stems directly from two main influences: the failure of the productivist ethos and a change in perceptions and priorities on the international scene. One of the dominant features of the last three decades, in England as in many other countries, has been the rise of urban forestry, the definition, remit, tools and applications of which are discussed in the last chapter of this first part.

To a certain extent, the second and the third parts reflect the official classifications of woodland benefits: market benefits and non-market benefits. But the purpose goes beyond following this classification, which does not do justice to the width and breadth of woodland issues, in particular to the underlying values of woodlands or to the power of representations. Yet, the latter can promote or hinder public policies, especially in the case of non-market benefits. Typical examples of this phenomenon are presented in connection with programmes related to education, health, community participation and access, where values and perceptions, when they are ignored, can clearly stand in the way of public policies being effective. Furthermore, the advent of urban forestry, especially since the 1980s as far as England is concerned, has changed the agenda and put an end to traditional categories (rural/urban, market/non-market). Instead, two visions of woodland emerge which apply to both cities and the countryside.

The second part reviews the concept of multi-purpose forestry and its consequences on woodlands. Although financial returns are given a low priority today, the calculations made to assess the benefits of forestry nevertheless rely more often than not on financial valuation, which leads to a certain ambiguity. The first chapter of this part focuses on the direct market and non-market benefits, with new outlets and new emphases. Another aspect of multi-purpose forestry very much stressed in official literature is its role in rural and urban regeneration, which is the object of the next chapter. This particular area relates to the economy, in so far as there are obvious financial returns expected from regeneration (e.g. inward investment), but it also reflects changes in the economy that call for changes in land use. The discourse on regeneration is scrutinised, so as to elicit what missions forestry is supposed to fulfil, then compared with incentives and programmes, in particular in the 12 Community Forests, showing that action does not always match rhetoric or social needs.

Arguably the first function of 21st century forestry is linked to the environment, pollution and climate change in particular. This is what the following chapter focuses on, bearing in mind the context of the production of scientific knowledge, in order to review the recognised scientific facts, and expose the fantasies and the exploitation of the tree image to enlist support and generate profits. This chapter analyses these issues and shows that, all in all, the image of the tree is exploited beyond what can reasonably be expected of trees and woodlands. The latest agenda of forestry, i.e. social issues, is the object of the last chapter of this part. Health and education, which are part of this agenda, are presented together because they have a lot in common in terms of objectives and of strategies. As in the previous chapters of this part, it is shown here that economic benefits are not absent from the agenda (for example, in terms of savings in the health sector or better trained youths). Moreover, official programmes, as well as those implemented by charitable organisations, reveal new definitions of health and education and a new conception of the missions of the State in these areas, to which social forestry can contribute.

The third part of the study moves into the realm of perceptions and politics. It explores how policies may differ from people's expectations and what woodlands, old or new, mean to people. The first chapter revolves around the controversial issue of amenity and access. All the policies described in the previous chapters rely for their success on regular contact with woodland, yet this is far from being simple, with the structure of land ownership in England making access/ibility problematic. Moreover, the issue of access/ibility is a culturally rooted one and its treatment today is indicative of social relationships. The discourse on the benefits of urban and community forestry emphasises the importance of people's participation as part of sustainable community building. The next chapter thus explores the theoretical framework behind participation and how it is interpreted by the Community Forests teams. This is supported by fieldwork and other studies showing, first, that woodland represents a minority interest and, secondly, that there remain obstacles to social inclusion, let alone empowerment, in English society.

Last but not least, the final theme explored in this book focuses on questions of conservation and argues that behind what may appear as motivated solely by issues of biodiversity/landscape heritage, there lies in the woodland a wealth of representations and identity markers which contribute to forming and informing people's perceptions of woodlands in the 21st century.

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