

# The Fear of Forestry

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THIS IS NOT a forestry-bashing article. Far from it. Most readers of this journal will accept that the downturn in agriculture, the main land use in Scotland, necessitates a shift of emphasis to alternative land uses. With much of the hill and marginal land below 1500w apparently suitable for the production of timber of a reasonably satisfactory quality, forestry is obviously one such alternative use. And a further diversification towards forestry, which of course has been progressing on a substantial scale since planting took off in the sixties, would seem to be a useful safeguard to the future well-being of the countryside and those who live and work in it.

Having said that, it would be wrong to ignore the fact that there is a substantial and growing undercurrent of disquiet and distrust with the current development programme not confined to the urban population. Fears arise on several grounds.

## What are these fears?

Firstly, quite a large proportion of the land suitable for the growth of timber of a satisfactory quality — and some land not so suitable — has already been planted up, and a planting programme of 30,000 hectares or 115 square miles per annum continuing apparently ad infinitum is causing forestry to press more and more heavily upon other competing uses, such as farming, sporting, conservation and tourism. The fear is that the continuing expansion of the planted areas will have an ever increasing adverse effect not only on the waders of Caithness but also on the grouse of Perthshire, the red deer of Argyll and the fishing rivers of the north and west to name but a few very important alternative uses which are largely unique to Scotland and could be at least as valuable as forestry to the Scottish economy in the long term.

Secondly, as the planting programme proceeds apace in a quite haphazard way and seemingly without any end in sight the fear is that the forestry use may become excessively dominant in Scotland in general and in some areas in particular. This may be quite acceptable whilst forestry is maintained in a prosperous state by the taxpayer but, having regard to the virtual irreversibility of the forestry use, this may lead to a dangerous situation if the forestry market should become depressed or if government financial support should be withdrawn.

Thirdly, the Government does not appear to have a comprehensive policy for land use in Scotland and thus a policy which would have regard not only to the development of forestry but also to its impact on other uses. The fear is that in this vacuum such policy as there is will be largely decided by, or on the advice of, bodies and people with a special interest in and enthusiasm for forestry, and that it will be swayed to an undue extent by the various specialist environmental lobbies.

Fourthly, although a further extension of the forestry area can almost certainly be justified on the grounds of achieving a desirable balance of land use, some of the reasons commonly put forward for expansion are at best arguable and at worst misleading. For example it is commonly stated that there will be a world shortage of timber. Suffice it to recall that but a year or two ago there was to be a world shortage of oil. And, of course, a world shortage of food to

feed the multiplying millions. And then we are told that 93% of our timber requirements are imported at an annual cost of £4.5 billion, the implication being that we could grow most of this in Scotland. But those who know about these things seem to agree that no matter how much of Scotland is given over to forestry the amount of timber products imported could not be reduced below about 75%, giving a saving of, say, £0.8 billion per annum — but at what cost? And again, great stress is laid on the creation of jobs by the timber industry and this may be true. But it should be borne in mind that large scale forestry tends to employ contracting firms from a distance, which in no way makes up for the loss to the hard pressed rural communities of the farmers and their shepherds and their families displaced by forestry. The fear therefore is that the extension of the forestry area, which can almost certainly be fully justified on the grounds of achieving a desirable balance of land use, may be sold to the taxpaying public upon the basis of arguments which are to some extent dubious.

Finally, there is the great gulf between commercial forestry, which is said to be required to meet the world shortage, replace imports and so on, and amenity forestry which a large proportion of the taxpaying public appears to prefer. Not for them the serried ranks of sitka spruce, but instead rough Constable-type hardwoods which will be easy on the eye of the Sunday afternoon motorist. There is a deep fear amongst the public that if the present trends continue much of the upland countryside of Scotland will eventually be submerged beneath a dark green blanket of sitka spruce. The government has for many years now provided substantial financial incentives to encourage the development of commercial woodlands and to convince the public that commercial timber must be grown on an economically viable basis — sitka spruce in serried ranks if necessary — it is now attempting to appease the environmentalists by giving even greater incentives for the planting of hardwoods.

For all these reasons there appears to be some confusion and distrust over the present planting programme. What seems to be required is for someone in authority in the Government, after taking advice not only from forestry and conservation interests but also from responsible representatives of all other important land uses in Scotland and from those who can advise on rural communities, to spell out in unequivocal terms the objectives of land use policy in the countryside, covering not only forestry but all other important and competing land uses. And if the forestry use is to be substantially increased, to what extent is it to be increased, who is going to advise the Government when a sufficient proportion of the Scottish countryside has been planted and what measures will be taken to ensure that other important land uses will not be adversely affected to an unacceptable extent. Only when such a comprehensive statement on land use has been made can the public be reassured that the programme of land use development has been properly thought out and that our successors will be left with a Scottish countryside with the various uses in an acceptable state of balance.