

# Community

**Dr Anna Lawrence** from Forest Research looks at how community forestry is flourishing around the world and the lessons for the UK

**F**rom Mull to Thames Chase to the valleys of South Wales, communities own or manage woodlands to protect jobs or greenspace, shape their own landscapes, conserve a favourite place, or create a focus for community development. They form partnerships with private landowners, the Forestry Commission, or local authorities (Lawrence, 2009a).

Highly successful partnerships guide the Community Forests around cities in England. Scotland can now count more than 190 members of the Community Woodland Association, while in Wales the recently established Llais y Goedwig promotes and supports community woodland groups. In England, more change may be in store.

At such times, it is useful to look at evidence and experience. There are lots of ideas and models emerging here in the UK – but could ideas from further afield also help?

Community forestry is a recognisable concept in most countries of the world. For several decades it has been associated most strongly with rural development, and developing countries. For many of us, Nepal would spring to mind as a strong example. In fact community forestry is much more widely applied and many industrial countries have long-established, highly successful models.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) collates data every five to ten years for its Global Forest Resource Assessment. The most recent one (2010) shows that although 80 per cent of the world's forests are publicly owned, both community forest ownership, and community forest management, are increasing.

The proportion of publicly and privately owned forest varies greatly between regions. Both can, however, be community forest. 'Public forest' can be community forest (because owned by a local authority, or managed by a community group). 'Private forest' can also be community forest (because owned by a group of people who define themselves as a community). Ownership and management interact in different models of community forestry.

## CONTEXT AND COMPONENTS OF COMMUNITY FORESTS

History, society, politics and economics both limit and open up options for community forestry. But change happens: community forests come and go, whether suddenly as in Romania after communism, or gradually as in the USA or Scotland. This wealth of experience across time and space can inspire new ideas in new places.

We can look at a community forest as a system containing a



community and a forest, linked through rules of use and decision-making, which in turn depend on community organisation, knowledge, power relations, external organisations and policies, and learning processes.

In fact, this basic model applies to all forest management. In private forestry, 'community' is replaced by 'owner'; in public forestry, it is replaced by 'society'. But the parts are the same: humans connect with forests through knowledge and use, influenced by policies and institutions.

What form can these connections take, in the case of community forestry?

## TRADITION AND CHANGE IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Many foresters in the UK are familiar with the well-managed woodlands of France and Germany, owned for centuries by villages and

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# connection



One model of community ownership in Romania gives rights to produce from a forest based on where people reside. Picture: Anna Lawrence

follows the ‘composesorate’ model, where families own and inherit shares in a forest. Residents in a community may have different shares, or no shares; and shares may be held by residents far from the forest.

A third model is that of the ‘primaria’, or municipality, where the local government owns the forest on behalf of a town.

These different models affect the levels of interest that residents have in their forests, and the processes for sharing the products.

## ORGANISING AND MANAGING

In many of these models, the ‘community’ is represented by forms of local government, who, in turn, set management objectives and contract forestry professionals.

Another form of community ownership and organisation is less obvious, but common in highly forested countries such as Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, and parts of the USA, such as Vermont, where families own significant amounts of forest. Owners frequently form associations to access forest management and markets, and share the costs.

Reorganisation of ownership and owners can be mirrored by a reorganisation of forest management services. In many European countries, a minimum standard of forest management is mandatory whether forests are privately or publicly owned. These services are often provided by the state forest department.

In Romania, however, a parallel private forest administration has emerged. Private forest districts require a minimum area to function, which creates an incentive for the new owners to form associations to contract these private managers.

## POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

Apart from imperial reward, or revolution, communities that want to own a forest are often faced with fundraising challenges.

Communities can make

towns. These can seem like models of stability and continuity, but the current situation can hide change.

More than half the public forests in France are owned by communes, especially in the east and in mountainous parts of the country. In the early 19th century the state took on their management. Since then the communes have organised to campaign for the right to manage their own forests. They also train commune staff in technical forest management (*Jeanrenaud, 2001*).

In Germany too, it is common for towns and villages to own forests. Forest policy and ownership varies by state in Germany. In North Rhine-Westphalia, the most urbanised and industrialised state of Germany, 279 forest co-operatives representing nearly 18,000 people (or one in every thousand residents), own 42,000ha of forest (*Landesbetriebs Wald und Holz NRW, 2010*).

Recent studies in Romania highlight this diversity of community models. Forests were nationalised under communism but since 1991, they have been gradually returned to those who owned them before the second world war. Because this restitution process is based on historical precedent, it has highlighted the different models of ownership that exist across the country (*Lawrence 2009b*).

In the east, the form known as ‘obste’ tends to predominate. This refers to indivisible forest ownership rights based on residence. All households in a given geographical community have equal rights to products from a given forest.

In Transylvania, the Empress Maria-Theresa of Austria gave forests to communities as a reward for protecting the borders of the empire. Community ownership

## FOOTNOTE

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innovative use of land use planning and conservation policies to purchase a forest. One small town in New Hampshire used the planning category 'town forest' (which combines local control with public ownership), and government financial support for conservation easements, to make the purchase of Randolph community forest possible (Willcox, 2005).

**MANAGEMENT DECISIONS**

Traditional community forestry can be a straightforward option for the forest manager. In Heidelberg, Germany, residents of each parish pay taxes which contribute to the foresters' wages and the running of the 'Gemeindewald' (community forest) (Bralant, 1999). In principle, the residents control what happens to the forest, and the forest office must consult with them. In effect, the forest managers make most of the decisions. There are efficiencies to this. It is a relatively simple one-to-one relationship.

For example, the state forestry department in North Rhine-Westphalia finds that community decision-making processes are quick and unbureaucratic, compared with working with small-scale private owners. It is also a contrast with the multi-stakeholder partnerships involved in some community forests in the UK, where decisions are more negotiated, but allow more voice for other objectives such as conservation and recreation.

**NEW KNOWLEDGE**

These examples of community-forestry partnership rely on forest science as the appropriate form of expertise in managing community forests. However, new schools of thought are emerging, linked to 'citizen science'. These are based on two needs. First, communities may have management objectives that require scientific knowledge not commonly in the repertoire of professional foresters. Second, as management systems and objectives become more complex, uncertainty becomes more prominent.

As a result, relevant knowledge is increasingly being contributed by members of communities. In Canada, monitoring populations of matsutake mushrooms depends on data from harvesters. In the western USA, several community groups have contracted ecologists, and gathered their own ecological data, to influence public forest management.

One group in New Mexico



People from one village in Germany bid for the right to cut fuelwood from trees in sections of a local forest. Photo: Renate Spaeth

**“ COMMUNITIES CAN MAKE INNOVATIVE USE OF LAND USE PLANNING AND CONSERVATION POLICIES TO PURCHASE A FOREST ”**



Access to timber from a public forest in New Mexico, USA, was negotiated through a community-based NGO which enables low-income community members to build small wood-processing businesses, such as for these bed frames. Photo: Tony Cheng

demonstrated, with scientifically valid data, that alternative thinning regimes could achieve desired basal area while still leaving clumps of trees for wildlife (Ballard et al., 2010).

**PRODUCTIVE FORESTS**

These examples highlight the importance of forest products to forest communities. In many of the Romanian communities, wood is the only source of heat as they lie far off the gas grid, and the language of 'annual allowable cut' regulated by central government is a matter of acute household interest.

Changing economic contexts, or resources, can reinvigorate communities' interest in their forests. High energy costs and concerns about sustainability have affected interest in wood for fuel.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, for example, the demand for firewood

has increased so much that in some cases it is no longer sold, but allocated only to forest co-operative shareholders.

In Portugal, village commons known as 'baldios' have been gradually privatised over centuries, and the remaining grazing lands degraded. The neighbouring state forests (some of them planted on former baldios) have begun to spill over, with pines regenerating on the commons, bringing new economic interest and motivation to the traditional owners (Jeanrenauld, 2001).

Production alone can be the basis for community involvement. Most of the Canadian forests are state owned, but harvested commercially.

Revelstoke, a mining and construction town in British Columbia, bought the 25-year Tree Farm Licence (which confers cutting rights, as well as management responsibilities) after a letter-writing campaign by the population, in 1993. Eighteen years on, the Revelstoke Community Forest Corporation annual reports show its centrality in the town's economy, with profits in some years of \$1 million, on an investment of \$1 million (visit [www.rfc.bc.ca](http://www.rfc.bc.ca)).

**LESSONS FOR THE UK?**

Our experiences in the UK have much to contribute to the story as well. Partnerships and community regeneration are two strengths of British community forestry, and while cooperatives are common abroad, new models of social enterprise have been pioneered here.

Experience with community forestry in Europe and North America might inspire us to reconsider the potential for productive community forestry, the value of place-specific knowledge and adaptive management, the roles of local government and professional foresters, and the dynamic interactions possible between owning and managing community woodlands.

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**i** See [www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7TSD7E](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7TSD7E) for research and reports on community forestry in the UK, and [www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/peopleandtrees](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/peopleandtrees) for the wider social research programme at Forest Research.