

Cultural values of trees, woods and forests

Forest managers have to take account of cultural values as one of the central themes of Sustainable Forest Management (SFM). These are accounted for in sustainability appraisals (e.g. the European Commission's Impact Assessment process), and also increasingly in monitoring systems such as the Montreal Process and the Pan European Indicators of the Ministerial Conference for the Protection of Forests in Europe. This study explored the existing and potential role of cultural values in forest planning, and included field work and interviews conducted over a 6 month period in 2009 - 2010. Recommendations include focusing on the role of cultural values in forest planning and community engagement.



"Whenever a project comes along, one element of the project is always how can this help with cultural development and of course it has to be matched to the qualities of the area. If there was some historical value, obviously that would play some part" (Thames Chase volunteer).

Background

Current national forestry policies stress the importance of SFM and the need to strike a balance between economic, social and environmental factors, as well as provide 'ecosystem services' including 'cultural services' as identified in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. However, specific mechanisms for including cultural services in forest planning are often weakly specified or compromised by severe economic pressures.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- Explore with a range of stakeholders (Forestry Commission (FC) and those it works in partnership with) how the cultural benefits provided by trees, woods and forests can be more clearly articulated and through what processes (e.g. Forest Design Plans, Statements of Significance) these can be delivered.
- Examine a selection of the cultural benefits of trees, woods and forests through participating in/attending events/activities and holding discussion groups with users and participants.
- Identify where further research is needed to provide a more comprehensive or detailed view of particular aspects of cultural benefit – contemporary and heritage.

Methods

- The study began with a literature review. Fieldwork included a series of semi-structured telephone and face-to-face interviews with a range of professional foresters and planners and also members of the public associated with volunteering and participation in relation to specific woodland areas chosen as case studies. The two case studies were Chopwell Wood in Tyne and Wear North East England, and the Thames Chase Community Forest to the east of London.

Findings

Increasingly scientists, forest managers, planners and policy makers recognise that by incorporating cultural values into forest management decisions, local products can be better promoted, development of tourism encouraged, a higher quality of life achieved for local populations, and the diversity of cultural landscapes increased for current and future generations. For this to occur, cultural values need to be part of many aspects of forest management and policy, including the valuation of forests. The research highlights a distinction in consultation and community engagement activities, between decision making processes and service provision. Decision-making processes such as the Forest Design Plan entail a mixture of formal consultation and dialogue with relevant authorities, and more informal engagement with publics and interested parties. A similar process is associated with large scale decisions such as Environmental Impact Assessments or Public Enquiries. Service provision includes everyday activities undertaken by FC community, recreation, and education rangers as they lead walks, run events and education visits. Through these activities the rangers engage with local communities, find out about their needs, and are able to encourage new groups to participate in forest activities. Also, through this service provision an understanding is gained of how people engage with and enjoy woodlands that can be utilised to change or improve delivery.

Recommendations

- Ecosystem services (including cultural services) should be considered as part of forest planning - e.g. who has access to them and how are the cultural benefits provided by woodlands distributed amongst different socio-economic groups?
- It may be helpful for the FC to distinguish between more formal decision-making processes such as the Forest Design Plan on the one hand, and the processes concerned with on going service-provision on the other when considering community engagement methods.
- The cultural assets of a wood can be enhanced in a variety of ways, for instance through the installation of artworks, or by collecting and displaying oral histories.
- Systems for analysing cultural services in use by other agencies might offer methods that could be adapted for use by the FC. Examples include 'Statements of Significance', and 'Landscape Character Assessment'.

Research is needed in relation to the three major issues raised by this study:

1. the cultural status of stakeholders (especially woodland visitors) including their knowledge and ability to access and understand the cultural value of woodlands
2. cultural assets of trees, woods and forests
3. how and if cultural values are taken into account in forest planning.

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Reports and Publications

Tabbush, P. M. (2010) Cultural Value of Trees, Woods and Forests. Report to the Forestry Commission, Alice Holt Lodge, Farnham Surrey. 64 pp
<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/INFD-874EMN>