

Dear Panel Members,

I am responding to the call for views by the Independent Panel on Forestry and I set out my thoughts roughly in terms of questions posed in the Call for Views document.

Question 1 - What do forests and woods mean to you?

My first point does not relate to the proposed sale of public forests or the future of those forests the government had in mind when it conceived the sell-off plan, but to that different type of forest comprising urban trees. Reports in the last few years have identified significant losses of large, broadleaf trees from towns and cities and their replacement with small-growing species, particularly ornamental trees. If there is an opportunity for the Panel to discuss the state of trees in towns and to make recommendations that might hope to shift present practice towards replanting, where losses have been unavoidable, with the larger species I think this would help to promote the landscape in towns and cities and bring more force to bear on resolving, in other ways, the problems that have led to the felling of so many big trees. In the urban environment, woods, park trees and street trees all combine to make for a natural amenity that is responsive to the non-commercial side of human existence, to the spirit and to wellbeing – though I recognise, also, that an urban environment with trees has a concomitant appeal for businesses because of its attractiveness to people and that it has the practical advantages of refreshing the air and reducing heat islands. The urban forest, therefore, should extend into all areas of towns and cities, rich and poor, residential and industrial alike. Even in Islington, a borough with a relatively high number of trees per hectare, there is need for considerably more street tree planting and more substantial planting within new developments.

Question 2 - What is your vision for the future of England's forests and woods?

- Ancient trees be given statutory protection and be supported by more resources.
- Woods and forests remaining in England be kept going, not grubbed up;
- Woodland and forests be expanded in area and in number;
- Sound management of trees continues to be developed through research and practice;
- Stronger legal protection be given to all trees, with credible enforcement;
- In giving people access to more woods and forests, which is a desirable goal, woods be seen not as areas within which to provide a range of attractions and entertainment unsympathetic and damaging to the experience of nature as nature.

Question 3 - What do you feel to be the benefits of forests and woods to:

a) you personally

I take walks in forests and among local park trees; I write about local tree issues for my local amenity group, Highbury Community Association and, recently, I have established a website, www.treetree.co.uk, devoted to trees and tree matters; my partner also paints pictures in forests. I grew up in the countryside but have lived in the city since my 20s. Following retirement, I have developed a strong interest in local trees and recognise they are responsible for forming a large part of the enjoyment that I and other people get from our surroundings. Were it not for nearby trees I believe I would not remain living in London despite its many attractions. The trees provide strong mitigation of the worst effects of urban life. Access to countryside and to woods and forests complement and extend significantly this experience.

b) society as a whole

Industrialisation and the growth of towns began the decline of a relationship with the countryside that has diminished human experience just as it has also resulted in diminishing areas of woodland and forests. Wellbeing, as the term is currently used, is stimulated by relaxing in nature. It is partly freedom from the demands of daily life, partly release from strictures such as minimal amounts of space in which to live and work. Being confronted with the acres of space that woods and forests occupy and the variety within woods and forests and the differences between one wood and another are in themselves a transformative experience.

c) the natural environment

There is much dismay at the loss of trees in, for instance, the Amazon. Clearance of trees world-wide brings severe environmental problems. The converse is the case; however, while there is much lip-service to climate change and green living it seems harder to do something positive about it. There is not the will to restrain the impact of mankind on the environment despite the warnings, despite the most headline-grabbing examples of bad practice. So, how in an age of measurement and calculation something as foreign to us, seemingly, as the importance of 'nature' can be made to stick, I do not know. There was a very striking pair of images in the London Assembly's report, "Chainsaw massacre", which contrasted a line of trees on the Thames Embankment in central London with an impression of the same view without trees. The stark difference is compelling. An English landscape without trees, woods and forests would be a loss both to society and as an impoverishment of nature.

d) the economy

I support the much greater use of wood in products large and small, whether it be in the construction industry, in household goods or even as wood for fuel. An expansion of England's forests, such that reliance on imported timber might be held in check, would be beneficial. Inevitably, fashion plays its part in the general interest taken in the use of wood and a strong drive to promote timber, not just as a healthy and sustainable product but as an aesthetically desirable material, needs to feed into the design and manufacturing sector to promote greater interest in wood and its innovative use in our daily lives.

Question 4 - We would like to hear about your suggestions of practical solutions and good practice which can be replicated more widely.

I have very mixed feelings about substantially extending the use of woods and forests for recreation. If enabling contact with nature for the general public is one of the reasons for allowing access to woods, retaining the feeling of nature is an essential aspect. I have been impressed at Epping Forest that so little is showing of unnecessary 'helpfulness' to the visitor and that exploration rather than guidance seems to be the basis upon which the very limited amount of signage has been set up. This has not prevented the provision of a visitor and study centre but it has meant that the visitor can get away from the irritating imposition of signs and the sense of being organised that has become increasingly prominent elsewhere. A sense of wonder comes from sensory perception; where this is downgraded by imposing facts, labelling and other elements posing as education, the inner personal relationship with trees is in danger of being stifled. Consequently, I would oppose more than limited provision of amenities, whether buildings or made-up tracks, in favour of letting people gain a personal experience free of the guiding hand or of attractions that create a disturbance. An educational tour or class in a wood is quite another matter and to be encouraged.

It is a related subject that the bisecting of woods by roads and the creation of new development that impinges on woods should be avoided. A walk in the woods is spoiled by intrusion of noise from roads or by the obvious closeness of buildings.

I believe it is important that deer numbers be reduced and the remainder stays in just a part of a forest. Deer damage flora that need protection.

Question 5 - What do you see as the priorities and challenges for policy about England's forests and woods?

The dramatic loss of woodland in England in the second half of the twentieth century made inroads upon precious trees and it is particularly alarming that areas of ancient trees have suffered very significant losses. While we live in an age that believes in science, it seems to me that very little, comparatively speaking, is known of ancient trees or, at least, that the knowledge is not widespread or making sufficient impact on politicians, local and national. I believe the protection of ancient trees should be foremost in your recommendations and that ways be found to encourage good management of these trees and to prevent further losses, including the provision of resources to enable further research.

There must be special provision in respect of pests and pathogens that are on the increase, apparently as a result of globalisation in trade and of climate change.

Fortunately, the loss of tree cover is not just challenged but is being redressed to some extent by organisations such as the Woodland Trust which has tapped into the general public's interest in nature and this is a marvellous development. However, without protection, other woods and forests may continue to be cleared and thus defeat attempts to expand the tree cover in this country. It is important, therefore, that legal protection of trees and enforcement of such protective measures are stepped up. Otherwise, I fear such new planting will be seen as an opportunity by others to continue clearance with the excuse that trees are being planted elsewhere. This is not a comment about the use of woods for timber where replacement planting is undertaken, but where cases of clearance are permanent, for such purposes as farming or development.

The economy is in a time of very great challenge for government. Nonetheless, there must be the provision of resources to advance and protect woods and forests. Whatever happens, the woods and forests must be protected against all kinds of potentially damaging suggestions that will arise where funds are restricted and companies stand to gain but to the detriment of woodlands.

Robin Hull

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