Appendix 7:
Drivers of Countryside Change
(Work Package 4.2)

Drivers of forestry change in the 1990s

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National trends in forestry policy

Throughout the 1990s it was government policy to support extension of the woodland area. The 2nd Report of the Agriculture Committee of the House of Commons considered that there could be anything from one million to five million hectares of surplus agricultural land by 2015. It suggested that "the most significant alternative land use for in the next twenty years is likely to be forestry"

The presumption that afforestation should only take place on 'unimproved land' of low agricultural value (one of the principal locational factors affecting forestry throughout the twentieth century) was no longer of paramount importance. But, confidence of commercial forestry was knocked by

a) the fairly recent (1988) decision to remove longstanding tax concessions which had originally been designed to encourage planting;

b) scrutiny of the form and role of the Forestry Commission, which was separated into Forest Enterprise and the Forest Authority (1992);

c) in 1994, there was intense speculation about the possible privatisation of Forest Enterprise;

d) many changes to the detail of the woodland grant schemes available.

Broad changes in the culture of forestry and woodland management

In the 1980s there had been there had been a resurgence in interest in the management of broadleaved woodland. This renewed interest continued through the 1990s, which moreover saw an increased emphasis on the management of all types of woodland in the interests of nature conservation, landscape, recreation, shooting and the provision of public access.

The shift in aims of management reflected changing demands of the public and was reinforced by a range of new and modified policies introduced by the Forestry Commissions, English Nature, the Countryside Commission and their successor organisations.

This shift has affected, to differing degrees, all types of woodland owner from large commercial forestry concerns through to the owners of small woodlands.

The physical manifestations of this general shift in management aims included subtle changes:

a) to the size and shape of woodland stands;

b) in the mixtures of species established;

c) in establishment techniques, with a move away from plantations towards the use of natural regeneration;

d) in thinning regimes.

Large commercial woodlands, especially in Scotland and the uplands, continued to be largely coniferous, though much more attention was paid to the careful management of non-wooded land within plantations such as rides, fire breaks, watercourses, and transitional areas between woodland and semi-natural habitats.

Another key trend throughout this decade was the increasing level of acceptance of the importance of semi-natural woodlands and habitat. This was reflected in continuing support for the careful management of ancient semi-natural woodlands throughout the UK.

In practical terms this led to the protection of old areas of Scottish native pinewoods, and the encouragement of their extension through natural regeneration.

It also led to the re-introduction on a moderate scale of traditional management techniques such as coppicing and pollarding.

In lowland woodland there was a move towards:

a) longer term less intensive management away from clear cutting and replanting;

b) small scale group working;

c) the maintenance of diversity of structure;

d) the use of a wider range of species;

e) the careful management of natural regeneration through thinning, singling and coppicing became more common;

f) the application of Continuous Cover Forestry.

New Schemes and Policies

A wide range of approaches including financial incentives, specific woodland creation measures, the development of markets and the use of private and voluntary initiatives. were implemented in the 1990s. The main policy drivers introduced or modified were:

1) A better land supplement added to the Woodland Grant Scheme to encourage planting on arable land and improved grassland (1990).

2) The setting up of Community Forests and other special forestry projects near large towns and cities for recreational and landscape purposes and the establishment of the National Forest in the Midlands.

3) New management grants announced in 1990 as part of the existing Woodland Grant Scheme. These provided hectarage payments for woodland management with higher rates for nature conservation and public recreation and management. They were introduced in 1992 to coincide with the end of transitional tax arrangements.

4) Special tree and woodland planting schemes associated with farm conservation schemes introduced by the Countryside Council for Wales, the Countryside Commission and the Scottish Natural Heritage.

Probable forestry and woodland changes, with regional variations and some indications of how signalled in CS2000

Coniferous afforestation of semi-natural habitat

This declined through the 1990's. There were considerable regional variations with most taking place in upland Scotland and to a lesser extent, Wales. Virtually non-existent in upland England. Negligible in the lowlands on heaths and semi-natural grassland. Particular attention should be paid to measuring the success of policies designed to encourage native Scottish pine woodland.

Coniferous afforestation of 'improved' habitat

Although policies were designed to encourage this type of afforestation, relatively little took place in the decade because the level of grants did not outweigh the decline in the capital value of farmland upon planting. Small patches of this afforestation occurred in the lowlands. There may be a concentration in areas designated as Community Forests.

Broadleaved/mixed afforestation of semi-natural habitat

There may well have been an increase in this type of afforestation in response to special schemes designed to encourage the establishment of native mixtures of broadleaves, such as upland birch woodlands in Scotland. Many new small farm woods may have been established on remaining fragments of semi-natural grassland.

Broadleaved/mixed afforestation of 'improved' habitat

If policies have been successful, one would expect a considerable increase in the establishment of new broadleaved mixed woodland on improved land. This is likely to consist of many new small farm woodlands, used primarily for game or landscape purposes. These may well be concentrated in areas where game shooting is particularly important (ie parts of East Anglia; Gloucestershire). There may also be concentrations in specially designated areas such as Community Forests and the National Forest.

Natural regeneration of woodland on semi-natural habitat

This will occur in relatively small patches across the UK. It is particularly likely on ungrazed, steeply sloping valley sides in the uplands of Scotland, Wales and northern England; on lowland ungrazed heaths and commons; and on ungrazed patches of semi-natural grassland such as steep slopes in the Downs and Cotswolds.

Natural regeneration of woodland on 'improved' habitat

Generally very small-scale. Unlikely to be measured by CS 2000. There will be a tendency for some areas of managed natural regeneration to be found adjoining exiting semi-natural woodland if policies designed to increase the size of such woods are working.

Woods showing little change

Many areas of woodland will show little change over the decade.

a) This may be because of the stage in the rotation, ie even-aged plantations may show little discernible change from pole stage onwards until, perhaps, a major thinning.

b) Some mixed broadleaved woods which are carefully managed under say a continuous cover system will show little change even though valuable timber may have been removed.

c) Other woods may show no change because they are unmanaged.

d) With the move to more subtle forms of woodland management there is a strong likelihood that woods which are managed, but which show no discernible change, will be increasing in number.

Conversion of broadleaved/ mixed woodland to coniferous woodland

This should be a rare occurrence especially in England. It is most likely to take place in larger upland plantations where extensive restructuring is taking place at the end of the first rotation.

Conversion of coniferous woodland to broadleaved woodland

This should be taking place on a fairly extensive scale as formerly mixed plantation made up to the 1950's have their coniferous element removed. This is particularly likely on woods on traditional landed estates where mixed plantations have been very popular. It will also take place in mixed plantations made on ancient woodland sites.

Loss of woodland to improved agriculture

This is likely to be rare in England, with the conversion of woodland to arable land virtually halted. It is most likely to take place in heavily grazed parts of the uplands, especially in Wales.

Loss of woodland to semi natural habitat

This will have taken place frequently, but usually on a small scale. It is most likely to occur where there are specific conservation schemes to remove plantations and natural regeneration in order to restore lowland heaths, chalk grassland, sand dunes and other valued habitats.

Survey suggestions

Need to improve resolution of CS2000 in order to measure increasingly subtle changes: as foresters become more expert at 'naturalising' their woodland in the landscape, management changes become camouflaged and more difficult to discern.

Surveys of squares. Need to interview woodland owners as well as farmers.

Need to carry out detailed fieldwork to assess subtle nature of woodland change.

References

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