

# Stasis in the forest?

*The final report of the Independent Forestry Panel includes some good news that is likely to become real, and some that isn't.*

## MARTIN SPRAY

"We've won!" was the gist of several reactions to the final report of the Independent Forestry Panel.<sup>1</sup> The feeling is still quite euphoric, and I would not wish to sour this. The euphoria, however, needs to be somewhat qualified.

The Panel deserves at least two cheers. Its final report published in early July<sup>2</sup> makes many of the same noises as are made by access campaigners, nature conservationists, and environmentalists. It seeks an increase in forest cover in England (its geographical remit), and it urges a move to a 'woodland culture' where appropriate.

Access is stressed, not only for the public estate. Rather like the urgings of the (Tory chaired) Environment, Food and Rural Affairs committee for more 'access to nature' and – urgently – more visits to the countryside and coast, this is in order to improve the health of people in the UK. Like the EFRA Committee, too, it holds more public 'engagement with nature' central, and doubtless supports the notion that both health and education departments "must create new ways of measuring and reporting on the links between 'greater public participation in activities in the natural environment and improved health and educational attainment'". This would be a highly relevant step towards a better integration of Department objectives.

## The holistic forest

According to the Panel's report and in case we didn't know, trees and woods are 'good for people' (pages 19 – 26); and they are 'good for nature' (pages 27 – 34). Nature conservation in woodland is stressed as a vital means of preventing the country's biodiversity disappearing up its own BAP. More effective management, which is "within our grasp", is needed for this; and this would be alongside a new, green, sustainable, woodland economy. Trees and woods are 'good for the green economy' (pp. 35 - 42). A woodland economy involving coppice products, wood as fuel, woodpulp for paper, and wood as building material, is envisioned, and several times invoked. There is, however, little indication of likely conflicts between greater access and conservation; and on the details, extent, compatibility, and viability, of a 'woodland culture', the report is shyly naive.

We are nearly all impatient to show support for such statements as "There is a strong case for moving the UK economy onto a greener footing". That support, though, must be directed to clear aims in which we can have objective confidence; and it must be given with a clear understanding of what needs to be done to make the effort likely to succeed.

Is what needs to be done likely to be what Government will adopt; and does it, if adopted, appear likely to succeed? It is difficult to see how big, how widespread,

the envisaged woodland culture is supposed to be. It is also difficult to judge just what impact the Panel's face-to-face visits had. For instance, did their visit here to the Forest of Dean show them people already engaged with the forest to a significant extent? Did it look as though people and businesses, would change – indeed, have begun to change – to wood as 'the product of choice'?

## Vision with reality

Figure 4 on page 17 suggests 'Some of the many elements and outcomes of a revitalised woodland culture'. It certainly looks like a rosy, sylvan, future: "Woods are effectively managed as part of the *local economy* supporting social enterprisers and providing wood for local heat and power..." "Forest-based industries are recognised as a key part of the *green economy* driving sustainable growth..." "Wood is valued as a sustainable, actively used resource that fits the demand of the 21st century and is seen to power our economy and society." But – we have recently been told that the price of wood is going through the roof, and that a wood-fuel future is viable only if we dramatically increase imports from northern America and from Russia. And how do we dramatically increase food production, in order to cut imports, while fending off timber imports, by having a woodland culture? The Panel's report came out just before a report on the 2011 census for England and Wales,<sup>4</sup> which shows us increased by 3.7 million in a decade. That is just one of the moving hurdles we are urged to jump...

## Spiritual connections and shares

Meanwhile the organisation that took root and developed as the leading anti-disposal campaign, locally-grown HOOF (Hands Off Our Forest), which, while interested in such matters, is most concerned that England retains a *public* forest estate, in the charge of the Forestry Commission, welcomes a generally very supportive report, and the opportunity to help take it forward. The details of the proposal are unclear, but the Panel seeks "evolved Forest Services" that can deliver the greater significance of woodland that is envisaged. These services are seen as working with the public forest estate, but separate from it. One thing that quickly became clear during the 'sell-off' debate hereabouts was the sympathy felt for the Forestry Commission and its good works. One hopes that the 'evolved' services can be similarly supported.<sup>5</sup>

The Report is positive, and upbeat. It makes up for a weak connection with parts of the real world by being enthusiastic. Its value is that it is unafraid to point to a vision that many of us have glimpsed but – still – too few are willing to speak about. "Our forests and woods are nature's playground for the adventurous, museum for the curious, hospital for the stressed, cathedral for the spiritual, and a livelihood fort the entrepreneur", says Bishop James Jones in his foreword. Now, we just need enough to go around...

## References and notes

1. E.g. 'Privatisation of forests finally axed as minister accepts defeat', *Independent* 5 July 2012; 'People power wins the day as panel backs HOOF call', *Forester* 5 July 2012; 'Public forests must not be sold, say advisers', BBC news alert 4 July 2012; 'Future of Forest of Dean plans 'welcomed' by campaigners', BBC Gloucestershire website 4 July 2012.

2. Independent Panel on Forestry (2012) *Final report*, available at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/forestrypanel/files/Independent-Panel-on-Forestry-Final-Report1.pdf>.
3. 'Visits to the countryside will improve the UK's health, say MPs', [www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/jul/17/mps-public-engagement-nature?CMP=EMCENVEML1631](http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/jul/17/mps-public-engagement-nature?CMP=EMCENVEML1631).
4. 'England and Wales population up', BBC news alert 16 July 2012.
5. Local MP Mark Harper welcomed the report with: "I'm delighted at the Government's initial response [...]. They have immediately agreed with the central recommendation of the Panel's report - to keep the Public Forest Estate, including the Forest of Dean, in public ownership [...] this was an important move, avoiding any worry about the future of our forests." 'Forest of Dean should remain in public ownership – report', [www.thisisgloucestershire.co.uk/Forest-Dean-remain-public-ownership-report/story-16480994-detail/story.html](http://www.thisisgloucestershire.co.uk/Forest-Dean-remain-public-ownership-report/story-16480994-detail/story.html), 4 July 2012. However, a HOOF thank-you letter notes that the crucial objective – "that our Forest must be managed on the public's behalf by a properly resourced Forestry Commission – has still not been conclusively resolved", [www.theforestreview.co.uk/Letters.cfm?id=24099&headline=Victory,but...,11July2012](http://www.theforestreview.co.uk/Letters.cfm?id=24099&headline=Victory,but...,11July2012).

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Volunteers help with forestry management work.

