

Scottish forestry, and sustainable development standards

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Forestry is a totally devolved subject with new legislation, a new strategy and a new government agency. It is the focus of this commentary, comparing what is stated in the recent documents with what anyone can see on the ground around Scotland.

The rhetoric is positive, all-embracing, and clear articulation of the present administration's ambition and action plans. The First Minister supports the goal of the Bonn Challenge, stating that, "we will play our part in global efforts to increase woodland cover and restore landscapes. Benefiting people and the environment." The Forestry and Land Management (Scotland) Act 2018 places "sustainable forest management" at the heart of the policy, although it fails to define what it means. It states that government land will be managed to further the achievement of sustainable development, defined broadly as tree planting providing climate change, environmental conservation and enhancement and social benefits. This is reiterated and developed both in Scotland's Forestry Strategy 2019-2029 and in Forest and Land Scotland's Corporate Plan 2019-2022. Cabinet Secretary Fergus Ewing emphasises that "forestry has a huge part to play in helping to meet the net zero greenhouse gas emission targets by 2045 by locking up significant amounts of carbon within trees, soils and peatlands." Key issues such as Natural Flood Management are linked to tree planting and management in the new agency's corporate plan. It also provides clear links to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Scottish Government's National Outcomes. All is well, one might think.

Let's take a tour around Scotland, as it provides a different picture.

Planning future planting is a fraught issue as there are not obvious large areas that can be planted without removing other land uses and their workers, such as hill farmers. That does not seem to be socially equitable. And do the jobs created in the new forests and woodlands go to local residents? It seems not in some areas, as contractors are used for planting and harvesting. And what about the landscape effects? The open moorlands prized by many and with a host of ecosystem benefits, such as the roosting and hunting grounds for many protected species, are lost. Evidence the loss of golden eagle in south-west Scotland due to afforestation. Evidence also the strong resistance to more commercial forestry in that area which already has more than anywhere else in Scotland. So why is there no spatial strategy? It can be provided through the regional land use strategies which the government supports. This approach would allow communities and owners to participate in real decision making rather than leaving it to the whim of the market. This approach resonates with the social and environmental components of sustainable development in practice, ensuring an informed approach to land use planning and helping to safeguard the livelihoods of those who really understand how to manage the uplands sustainably.

Planting trees would seem to be a relatively benign activity. Well, it is not always, even when the planting is supported by government financial assistance. Planting on land totally

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covered with vegetation by using downhill ploughing cannot be allowed, and yet it is. Are the grant enforcers asleep? They must be, as vegetation is destroyed, carbon released, soil and nutrients lost downhill, and the whole hillside becomes

a series of rills for removing nature's legacy rather than enhancing it. This is hardly the practice of ecosystem management and environmental sensitivity.

And so to harvesting. Heavy machinery is in use rather than more suitable techniques, such as wire lining, which is only used on

steep slopes and near to roads. Heavy machinery, operated usually by contractors paying piece terms means lack of conservation to communities and nature. There are negative effects on the soil through carbon loss, structural damage and nutrient loss; on the amenity of the area by leaving it like a bomb site; and to the local people who do not get the jobs and are left with the unsightly consequences and the timber trucks passing through communities. The Strategic Timber Routes are merely a matter of convenience for getting the timber out to the processing factories. Although sea transport has been used in part of the country, was any thought ever given when planting as to how to transport the timber out? I doubt it. But that is exactly what the sustainable development ethic requires: think of the consequences for people and the environment before making decisions.

And how are the wrongs of the past to be righted: wrong trees, wrong designs, unsupervised planting and thoughtless harvesting? We see it all over Scotland.

The Strategy has the principles of sustainable forest management at its core, including an adherence to the principle of 'the right tree, in the right place, for the right purpose'. To achieve this requires a change in the mind-sets of the forestry industry and the engagement of people who understand rural communities and their natural environment, if the sustainable development ethic is to be achieved in practice.

