



Woodland crofts

With foresters struggling to find time to visit their woods, Jamie McIntyre reminds us that local intensive management can bring additional benefits, which may be difficult to achieve under conventional management models.

Not long ago, I attended an interesting forestry workshop at which the local beat forester outlined the history of a particular Forestry Commission woodland. However, he then went on to confess - if that is the right word - that he had only managed to visit the wood once in the previous 18 months. Many in the audience were slightly taken aback by this, but to me it was not a surprise. You only have to 'do the maths' to realise that this is the current reality: fewer foresters than in the past, with ever more things to do, trying to cover ever larger areas of country.

This is not a 'dig' at the Forestry Commission; the situation in the private sector is very similar. Indeed many would not see this as an issue at all, but rather evidence of enhanced efficiency. With improved information technology - computer-based mapping and sub-compartment databases, brought together in sophisticated GIS systems - the 'forester's

Compact tractor skidding harvested oak on a woodland croft in the Sunart Oakwoods. Photo: Jake Willis.

footprints' are perhaps less critical to forest management now than they once were.

The biggest overheads of most organisations are staff costs: forester time is money. When the immediate job at hand is taken care of, they simply cannot afford the luxury of further time on site, or indeed more frequent visits than necessary, given typical travel times from the office. Many would agree, however (not least foresters themselves), that it would be desirable to be able to spend more time in the woods, enhancing their local knowledge, which would improve management, leading to even better benefits being delivered. But until someone finds a way to increase management input without adding to costs, is this just wishful thinking?

Family forestry

Maybe we are approaching the issue in the wrong way. Arguably, a model already exists where high levels of management input can be sustained without incurring crippling costs. We may not be all that familiar with it yet in Scotland, on account of the way

our forest industry has developed in the past, but it is common - indeed the norm - the world over, where it is better known as 'family forestry'. Various definitions for this can be found but the one I like particularly is, "small scale forestry, based on personal involvement and strong stewardship values", which hints at an answer to the issue introduced above.

In considering how family forestry can deliver more for less, it is worth taking a closer look at one model of family forestry that we do have, which enjoys the support of the Scottish Government - woodland crofts. The creation of new woodland crofts was officially recognised and enabled in 2007/8, with changes to legislation (the Crofting Reform Act 2007) and policy (for example, the National Forest Land Scheme). While the working definition of a woodland croft ("a croft with sufficient tree cover overall to be considered a woodland under UK forestry policy") can also apply to 'historic' woodland crofts, including those planted up under crofter forestry provisions of the



1990s, there is no question that the events of 2007/8 provided a major boost and official sanction for the model.

However, as anyone involved in the process will recall, this was not a 'quick win' but was the culmination of many years of discussion and patient promotion of the concept by its supporters,

and followed a comprehensive 'official' examination of the issues. The study was delivered by a steering group tasked with examining "whether, and how, national forest estate (NFE) land might be used to create new crofts under crofting legislation". Though the given focus was the NFE, the report actually addressed the general principles involved and as such its conclusions regarding the benefits of woodland crofts could be applied much more widely.

Additional benefits

Though published eight years ago, the steering group report still remains one of the best-argued cases for woodland crofts we have. Its strength lies in its hard-headed focus on public benefits: woodland crofts are worth having, because they can deliver more.

These potential benefits - too many to list here, but I would encourage readers to study the report in full ^[1] - were grouped under the usual economic, environmental and social headings. One in particular is worth quoting here in respect of my earlier remarks. Woodland crofts, the report considered, had the potential to:

"Derive economic benefits from local intensive management of areas of forest that may be difficult to achieve with remote management on an extensive basis".

Though economic benefits were highlighted in that statement,

environmental and social ones could just as easily have been included too, as highlighted elsewhere in the report. The key point is the recognition that local intensive management can bring additional benefits, which may be difficult to achieve under conventional management models.

Why, then, might a resident woodland crofter be able to justify a greater intensity of management than a more remote forester? The answer lies in multiple benefits - to the crofter. The crofter derives not just a degree of income from his woodland, but it is also for him a place to live, grow food and fuel, and carry out other business activities. Not all of his work in the woods needs to be remunerated directly.

Where a conventional forester will commission survey work at a cost, to understand his woodland better, the woodland crofter will build up an intimate knowledge of his wood through general day-to-day activities. The emergency site visit following severe weather, rather than disrupting existing work plans, becomes an early morning walk with the dog. 'Uneconomic' thinning for timber quality and biodiversity improvements becomes the annual firewood programme.

Enhanced knowledge of the woodland built up through time on site allows an attention to detail which maximises the opportunity to add value. Defects which would otherwise consign timber to woodfuel in conventional markets, are graded out for higher value uses, such as turnery or character flooring. Integrated with silviculture, other uses of the woodland such as grazing or tourism activities, add economic value to the woodland beyond simply its production of fibre. Perhaps above all, the intimate knowledge of the forest held by the working woodland crofter, and his frequency on site, enable management for biodiversity of the highest level: no rare plant is missed; nor any butterfly hotspot needing to be kept open and sunlit; nor any squirrel drey which could be at risk from harvesting.

I am sure I do not need to labour the point further. By making woodland

management a part of people's lives, rather than a waged activity only, we allow more to be done for less money, whether that is provided through timber income or grant support. You might call that 'sweat silviculture' - analogous to the 'sweat equity' invested by self-builders in their homes.

Expansion

If family forestry characterised by woodland crofts is unquestionably a good thing, then we surely need much more of it. Perhaps the only dissenting voices would come from industrial forestry interests who might fear such a shift could affect their own business activities. However, many parts of the world with high levels of family forestry - Scandinavia being a case in point - sustain large and successful forest industries, where production is co-ordinated and marketed through owner co-operatives.

Furthermore, a significant expansion of family forestry in Scotland would only require a small fraction of existing woodland - a fraction which will be more than offset by the planned increase in woodland area under Scottish Government targets ^[2].

The Scottish Crofting Federation has a stated policy position that 5,000 new woodland crofts should be created over the next few years. Sounds a lot - until you realise that even at, say, a generous 10 hectares each on average, the total area involved would amount to less than 10 per cent of the existing woodland in the crofting counties of Scotland. Food for thought...

References

¹ http://woodlandcrofts.org.cp-27.webhostbox.net/?page_id=140 (2006 Report)

² www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/inf-d8lahdj

www.woodlandcrofts.org

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