

Need for More Trees

We need more tree planting in the UK period. In particular, we urgently need to plant more conifers. Although woodland cover was at an all-time low after the two world wars (5%) and is now higher (approximately 13%), the UK is still one of the least wooded areas in Europe (EU average 37%). The UK is still importing 80% of its timber needs. Most of it is softwood, i.e. from conifers. Conifers in the UK got a bad rap from conservationists in the latter part of the 20th century and rightly so. It wasn't that conifers were bad per se, it was where they were planted and how they were planted – i.e. in monocultures. The urgent drive for the Forestry Commission to secure Britain's timber supplies after two world wars led to approximately 120,000 hectares of Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) in England and a significant area of the Flow country in Scotland being planted up. A lot of these sites are now being restored to broadleaves and heather moorland with the removal of conifers.

Since the conifer plantations of 1960s and 70s, foresters in the UK have learned from past mistakes and are ready to move on. Now is the right time to create new conifer plantations in the right place, of an uneven-aged structural composition. The World Wildlife Fund's "Living Forests Report" 2011 says that global timber demand could triple by 2050 and suggests the extra timber could be sourced from newly created plantations and from sustainably managing existing forests. Apparently, we could grow all the timber we need globally on no more than 20% of the planet's surface, leaving the remainder for "biodiversity". In the UK species and structurally diverse plantations in the uplands are a pragmatic solution for growing softwoods to meet UK future demand as well as providing economic benefits to upland farmers and mitigating future flood-risk downstream. This, as well as, the need to bring woodlands back into management would go some way to meeting some of the UK's future timber needs. Currently, according to Forestry Commission data, there are 600,000 hectares (1.5 million acres) of unmanaged woodland in England alone. Despite this, even if all these woods were to be thinned now, there would still remain a shortfall of home-grown timber.

The Forestry Commission's current timber availability forecast predicts a shortfall of timber supply after 2031 so urgent action is needed now. Unfortunately, the previous grant scheme (EWGS) and the current woodland creation capital grants under the new Countryside Stewardship are weighted heavily towards the planting of broadleaves. It's a sad fact that no new conifer plantations were planted in England in 2014 making it really difficult to see where all the softwood timber is going to come from. Unless there is some kind of government-led environmental initiative (e.g. afforestation of the uplands) to drive any change in land use, the amount of timber having to be imported will increase.

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