

# if you go down to the woods today...



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A picture essay exploring UK & Scottish forestry policy  
- Ted Leeming -



## Wordcloud responding to the question *‘...what 3 words describe forestry in Galloway today?’*

# ...if you go down to the woods today...

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This picture essay explores current forestry policy, practices and management in the UK & Scotland, including the soon to be announced revisions to the UK Forestry Standard and recent consultation with respect to the Scottish Forest Grant Scheme.

The essay forms an outcome following an innovative community consultation & artist residency undertaken by Ted Leeming & Morag Paterson at the Fantastic Forest Festival held in Galloway in February 2023. The artists organised & co-curated the festival with the Galloway Glens Landscape Partnership, together with a wide range of partners & volunteers.

As part of the residency, at various events the community were asked '**What 3 words describe forestry in Galloway today?**'. The word cloud opposite gathers together the 70+ responses received.

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At 13% of land cover, the UK has one of the lowest levels of tree cover in Europe. According to the Woodland Trust, just 7% of our woodlands are in a good ecological condition. Industry, environmental organisations & Government all agree that we need more tree cover throughout the UK.



Ancient temperate rainforests are of the most rare and valuable habitats in the UK, comprising of less than 1% of woodland cover, and yet few of these incredible ecosystems are designated. A YouGov poll found that 93% of the British public supported their increased protection.



Many of our existing woodlands are under threat from multiple sources. These vary from site to site but include overgrazing, invasive species, development, storms, drought, pollution, pests and diseases. As a result, many of our woodlands are slowly dying or disappearing.



Current policies are focussed towards new planting schemes. 75% of these are being delivered in Scotland, with CONFOR, the industry body, saying that the UK Government is well behind on delivering its stated annual objective of 30,000 hectares of new planting by 2025.



Half of all new schemes in Scotland are for single species conifer plantations, of which 50% are concentrated in southern Scotland. Argyll and Perth & Kinross in Scotland and Wales are also witnessing large numbers of proposals.



729 commercial conifer applications have been approved across Scotland since 2015. None have been refused consent in that period and only 4 have required an Environmental Impact Assessment [source: *Scottish Forestry*]. The sheer number of commercial conifer applications in some areas is increasingly controversial.



Commercial forestry proposals have focussed largely on upland pastures and hillsides, displacing traditional farming activities & open moorland species. The result is increasing conflict between different interest groups.



The cumulative impact of multiple forestry applications is becoming a significant issue in some areas as adjacent schemes merge & fragment landscapes & habitats. There are few checks & balances to curtail over-development.



The extent of biodiversity within conifer plantations is contentious. The industry argues that biodiversity within a plantation is increased over existing land uses. The Woodland Trust, however, states that '*non-native plantations in particular require management to improve their ecological condition*'.



Woodlands are important for local economies and jobs. However many, like the independent forum, The Forest Policy Group, argue that the industry should and could contribute much more to local economies, supporting and promoting small to medium enterprises and local long-term jobs.



Forests store carbon, both in the tree itself and in the soil. Forest Research, the Government's own advisers, conclude that clear fell plantations are unlikely to absorb the amount of carbon released from the soil over a 30 year rotation period if planted on peaty soils 30cm deep. Despite this, Government policy continues to allow planting on peaty soils up to 50cm.



At the end of the first rotation it is standard practice to clearfell sites & replant with more conifers. This can be undertaken with minimal assessment, even on peat soils of 50cm or more where new planting is banned.



Most forestry products (including paper, cardboard, wood products, biomass fuels and wood based panels) sequester carbon. Industry figures state that over 40% of clear fell forestry products sequester carbon for 5 years or less & just 27.3% sequester for longer than a single plantation rotation [source: *CONFOR*]



15% of forest products goes to supplying the increasingly questioned commercial biomass industry [source: *CONFOR*]. The UK's largest commercial biomass plant, DRAX, has recently been dropped from an index of green energy companies following concerns with respect to its environmental credentials.



Drainage is used to reduce the amount of water within plantations. Such drains dry out the soil, releasing carbon and increasing the acidification of watercourses. Data shows a river in south west Scotland to be the most acidic in Europe, with acidity peaks enough to kill juvenile salmon [source: *Smyth*].



The industry says it is being judged on schemes planted in the 1980's and things are very different now. Many others say they see only cursory differences (relatively small areas of broadleaf & open spaces), with large scale replanting & new densely planted, single species conifer plantations across many hillsides.



The threat from unprecedented storms can have a catastrophic effect on plantations. In 2021, Storm Arwen flattened some 16 million trees of largely plantation forestry in a single night [source: BBC]. With climate change, such storms are predicted to become increasingly frequent & severe.



Pests & disease are a major threat to sequestration targets & storm & drought events can trigger outbreaks [source: *Økland and Bjørnstad*]. A bark beetle that attacks Sitka spruce is currently causing significant damage to forests in Europe & southern England. If it reaches Scotland at any point in the next 30 years it could wipe out up to 1 million hectares of conifers. Diverse planting is said to reduce such risks.



Prices for low grade agricultural land have increased at least 5 fold since 1993 [source: *Savills*]. Many attribute this at least in part to attractive investment forestry policies, subsidies & tax breaks, resulting in what some are describing as 'the second clearances'.



Forests can be valuable resources for recreation, wellbeing and wider community benefit. But conflicts are being exacerbated by an ongoing reluctance of some developers to allow access over previously accessible land, or to meaningfully consult with local communities.



Tree planting is subsidised by the tax payer whilst commercial forestry incurs no income tax, capital gain or corporation tax. Annualised investment returns over the last 15 years have averaged 18.9% at one investment house [source: *Gresham House*].



Some are now saying that with the current speed of change it may already be too late for southern Scotland & that lessons urgently need to be learned to prevent a replication across other areas of Scotland and the UK. Locals disagree & continue to campaign for more diversity & sensitivity in planting, together with community involvement, in order to deliver a better balance between biodiversity, climate, community, societal & commercial needs.



Communities for Diverse Forestry say that to deliver solutions all parties urgently need to work together with a mindset of compromise and partnership. At present, however, there is a polarisation of views as interest groups defend existing positions with respect to competing land uses & environmental demands.



There are many exemplar projects across the UK, both large & small, that showcase innovative & more traditional approaches to the delivery of Government targets. All include some form of compromise, but many appear to offer a greater balance for biodiversity, climate, community, society & commercial needs than current local schemes deliver.



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