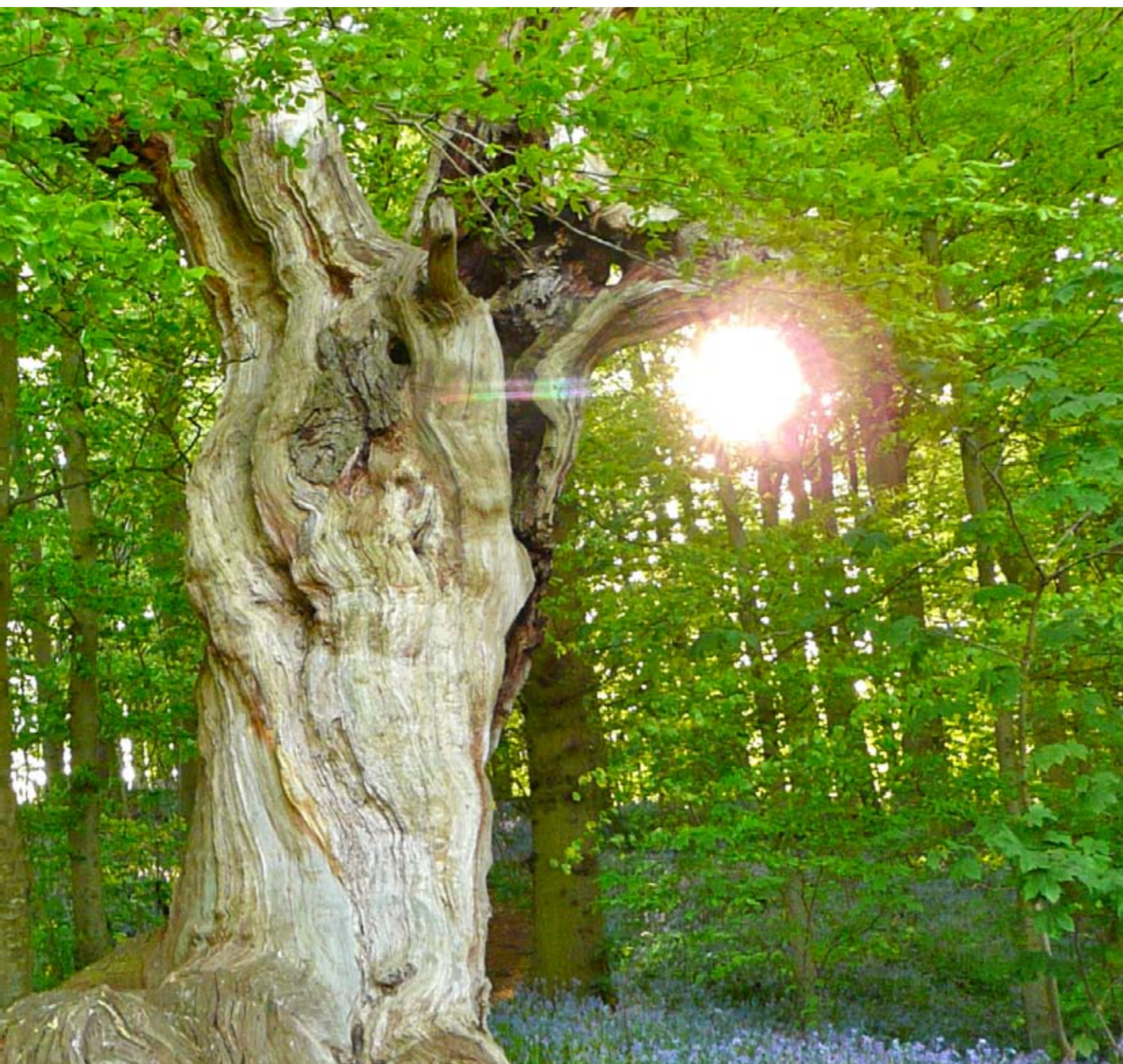


OUR forests

A people's vision for the future of England's public woods and forests



A summary of evidence from the 2009 public consultation

A people's vision for the future of England's public woods and forests

“The Forestry Commission is very good value for money for the land area of the estate that it manages. It does a great deal and achieves a number of objectives for public benefit, such as wood production (timber, fuel etc), public access, and environmental gain (soil conservation, wildlife enhancement, landscape enhancement).”

National Trust, responding to public consultation on the future of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate 2009

On 17th February 2011, Defra Secretary of State, Caroline Spelman announced the halting of the Government's plans to 'dispose' of the Public Forest Estate (PFE) in England managed by the Forestry Commission. A public consultation linked to the disposal plans was also ended.

This U-turn by Government followed five months of intensive campaigning led by the on-line activist group 38 Degrees, building on grassroots protests across England.

Over 530,000 individuals signed 38 Degrees' 'Save Our Forests' petition.

In her announcement halting the disposal plans, Mrs Spelman announced she would be forming an 'Independent Panel of Experts' to report back to Government in Autumn 2011 with its final recommendations on 'the future direction of forestry and woodland policy in England' due in Spring 2012. The panel, chaired by the Right Reverend James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool, includes senior figures from major national conservation and access bodies, as well as forestry representatives.

Nevertheless, there are real concerns over how limited the Panel will be by its terms of reference, the role some of those national bodies played in the public campaign and the absence of any direct representation of local groups and grassroots communities.

The Independent Panel first convened on 31st March. The same day, a group of individuals all of whom had been involved in challenging the Government's disposal proposals, also met. Those individuals agreed to form a separate 'ginger-group', **Our Forests**, with the aim of ensuring that the Government appointed panel focuses on key issues, considers crucial available evidence and takes on-board grassroots views, in particular the concerns expressed by more than half a million people via the 38 Degrees' petition.

Our Forests' first intervention is to ensure that the Panel takes into account the crucial resource of factual evidence, along with an extensive survey of the public's views on the future of the Public Forest Estate, already available from the consultation exercise concluded in September 2009.

The Coalition Government ignored the findings of that consultation on the narrow political grounds that it was initiated by the previous administration – and was set to spend more public money on conducting another, although far less comprehensive consultation, just six months later. The Independent Panel must not repeat that short-sighted omission and costly error of judgement.

Given the breadth and depth of views gained and the relevance of the research undertaken for that earlier consultation **Our Forests** believes that the findings of that consultation should form the foundation and framework for the Independent Panel's deliberations – hence producing this summary which has been sent to all the Panel members individually.

Findings from the 2009 consultation exercise

Topline Findings:

- Majority of respondents wanted Public Forest Estate to increase in size
- Public trust Forestry Commission
- **PFE seen as ‘Value for Money’ by public:** *“This other figure which really amazed me, do you know how much it is per person, per year, to each person in England, the government spends? 30p, that’s the £14m divided into, 30p, so if we were all willing to spend 60p [laughs], you could almost, it’s almost having a little box in the village shop where people come in and say “put my 10p change into the charity box. It’s such a trivial amount, yet governments for years have agonised over and said the Forestry Commission, the cost, it doesn’t make a profit but 30p for free access to Alice Holt and your motorbikes and your cycling and ...”*
- Public want a Public Forest Estate but without political interference
- Economic study found PFE could cover costs – especially if greater focus on delivering recreation values and providing (and being rewarded for) ecosystem services
- PFE provides non-market benefits an order of magnitude greater than the costs, providing a substantial subsidy to the Nation in the form of non-market benefits
- 99% of key wildlife sites (SSSIs) on the PFE are in favourable or recovering condition, higher than for any other land manager – including Natural England and all the conservation bodies.

The Long-term Role of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England: Consultation

The 2009 public consultation asked for opinions about the long-term role of the Public Forest Estate in England: how it is managed, how to add greater value through public ownership, and how this can be paid for. Two questionnaires were produced:

- An in-depth 26 question document available on-line and as a hard-copy, which drew 2,239 responses.
- A shorter survey carried out at Forestry Commission visitor centres, completed by 2,287 individuals.

Respondents to the in-depth questionnaire included:

- nearly 1,400 individuals
- 85 local community groups
- 78 representatives from the forestry industry
- 56 Non Governmental Organisations
- 158 other associations, groups or forums.
- All the major conservation and environment groups, including those now represented on the ‘Independent Panel’.

The responses to and findings from those questionnaires can be found online at:
<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-estatestudy-evidence>

Further consultation

The Forestry Commission England also undertook a series of eight regional and one national Public Consultation meetings across the country. More information on these can be found at: <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-estatestudy-consultation>

In addition, detailed research was conducted and published on the following areas and issues: Economic analysis of the public benefits provided by the Public Forest Estate in England and the potential for increasing those.

[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-econmicresearch-final.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-econmicresearch-final.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-econmicresearch-final.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-econmicresearch-final.pdf)

Social research conducted via user groups of people's experience, values and expectations about the Public Forest Estate.

[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-socialstudy-report.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-socialstudy-report.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-socialstudy-report.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-socialstudy-report.pdf)

Scientific assessment of the delivery of national environmental and biodiversity objectives on the Public Forest Estate.

[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-environmentalstatusreport.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-environmentalstatusreport.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-environmentalstatusreport.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-environmentalstatusreport.pdf)

Landscape values


[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-landscapediscussionpaper.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-landscapediscussionpaper.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-landscapediscussionpaper.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-landscapediscussionpaper.pdf)

These and other specific research initiatives added considerably to the knowledge-base provided by the public consultation questionnaires and meetings.

From all of this work, an independent working group produced a summary and set of recommendations, a first draft of which was presented to the Forestry Commission England's National Committee in May 2010 and subsequently made available to Ministers. That earlier working group's summary and recommendations also appear to have been ignored by the Government. But as with the evidence it drew upon, the report of that earlier independent working group should be considered by the current Independent Panel, as being critical to its deliberations.

<http://saveourwoods.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Defra-Working-Group-Paper.pdf>





Excerpts from the 3 part findings of the public consultation and study on the long-term role of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate (PFE)

Summary Report

[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-evidence-part1.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-evidence-part1.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-evidence-part1.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-evidence-part1.pdf)

- Many people place a particular value on the size of the estate and what they see as the trusted brand of the Forestry Commission as its managers;
- **Responses are characterised by ‘a passionate engagement’ with the Public Forest Estate and a desire to ensure it continues to provide multiple policy objectives on a sustainable basis.**
- The Forestry Commission is seen as an exemplar body with management responsibility for an important part of the Nation’s heritage.
- The political and institutional context in which the Forestry Commission operates is identified as a particular challenge, with clear concern expressed on the ability to deliver on policy objectives given an anticipated reduction in government support and a changing policy context.
- The Estate is seen to represent good value for money in providing multiple social and environmental benefits and there is a strong desire for the Estate to increase in size
- There is strong resistance to the Disposal Policy and concern over relinquishing management to third parties, notably the private sector.
- Public funding is seen as the basis for supporting the Estate. A diverse range of commercial opportunities are supported, but with caveats centred on minimising the negative impacts of these on public benefits.
- **The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated a desire for the PFE to increase in size.**
- If we only had the resources to do one of the activities you have suggested that increase costs, which should this one activity be? The majority of respondents simply state, “*Plant more trees!*”

Detailed findings

[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-evidence-part2.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-evidence-part2.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-evidence-part2.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-evidence-part2.pdf)

- There were over 1,000 uses of the words “*climate change*” and “*carbon*”, and these topics are perceived to represent both opportunities and challenges.
- Allied with the concern for financial viability, respondents identify negative impacts resulting from the privatisation of the PFE, particularly relating to reduced provision of environmental and social services, and specifically, access rights.
“*The threat of privatisation and therefore loss of benefit to the people of this country.*”
“*The tendency to judge on monetary cost instead of the overall benefit.*”
- A large majority of respondents indicate that the overall size of England’s PFE should increase. Not only did these 1500+ respondents tick the indicator “*increase*”, nearly all of them provide written commentary on why the expansion of woodlands is so important.
“*The state forest should be expanded to meet the multi purpose needs of people, the environment and the economy. Improvements in the biodiversity, landscape and other standards of the current forest will require compensatory replanting to maintain levels of production at a sustainable level in the future.*”
James Jones and Sons Ltd

Excerpts from the 3 part findings of the public consultation and study on the long-term role of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate (PFE)

Detailed findings continued

[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-evidence-part2.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-evidence-part2.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-evidence-part2.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-evidence-part2.pdf)

- Respondents repeatedly state the desire for the Forestry Commission to be permitted to manage its own affairs on the Public Forest Estate, and not be unfairly or politically influenced by Government interference. Many believe that Government's short-term interests conflict with the visionary and long-term objectives set out by the Forestry Commission.
"The Public Forest Estate is not an arm of the government. You should remain, and be seen to be, independent."
Individual
- *"The FC should consider how to increase visitor revenues. People need to realise that our environment is managed at a cost. That does not mean though that the FC should sell its soul for the money. The FC is a vitally important public institution."*
Paul Beevers, Basingstoke
- *"The Forestry Commission should be complemented for its implementation of ideas and forward thinking. The FC should not be swallowed up by a larger organisation that will lack the focus and the knowledge built up by the Commission, nor should it be broken up into smaller less efficient bodies."*
Joy Shawcross

Digest of Responses

[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-evidence-part3.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-evidence-part3.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-evidence-part3.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-evidence-part3.pdf)

- *"The proportion of publicly owned land in England is very low by comparison with countries around the world that have successful and highly regarded protected area programs that provide a range of recreational opportunities as well as refuge for wildlife i.e. Canada, America, Australia, New Zealand, S. Africa etc. As the public body with the largest amount of publicly owned land, the FC are in a position to argue the case for developing a new and comprehensive protected area system in England, with the multiple uses and multiple benefits that it would bring, and especially providing an experience of wild nature that is rarely available in England now. An aim must also be to create the "ancient woodlands" of the future in England, increasing our woodland cover from the low end in Europe that it is at the moment."*
Dr Mark Fisher, West Yorkshire

"The Commission should only be allowed to sell woods in exceptional circumstances. We should be going in the opposite direction, making acquisitions! I think it is particularly wrong that the Commission is able to sell ancient woodland. Even if it is sold to conservation organisations as safe purchasers, they are bearing too much of the burden of conserving the nation's wildlife as it is. The public estate should take a greater share of the responsibility for this. The Forestry Commission should be seen as a 'safe buyer'! It seems crazy, now that we recognise the benefit of woodland for the long term - that the Government is not focused on increasing the size of its forest estate and providing the money to do this. Rather than talking of development opportunities and making money from asset sales we should be focused on increasing the value of the asset. Not selling off the family silver."

Simon Osborn

Economic Contribution of the Public Forest Estate in England, 11 January 2010

This report sets out the methodology and findings from research aiming “to use economic valuation techniques to analyse the social, economic, and environmental contribution to public benefit of the Public Forest Estate (PFE) managed by the Forestry Commission (FC) in England and identify ways of increasing this contribution”.

[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-econmicresearch-final.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-econmicresearch-final.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-econmicresearch-final.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-econmicresearch-final.pdf)

Results are presented for several scenarios for the Public Forest Estate. Under the assumptions used in this report, the main sources of value from the forest estate are recreation, greenhouse gas regulation and aesthetic value.

- **Overall, benefits are an order of magnitude greater than costs, in all scenarios.**
- The best performing scenario under economic valuation is “recreation focus” which achieves high values due to the aesthetic and recreational importance of urban community woodlands, and the recreation benefits of woodlands with significant investments in leisure facilities due to the number of visitors. Recreation on the PFE is estimated to have an economic valuation of around £160m per year at present (working out at an average value of £4 per visit) and this rises to around £260m per year under the recreation focus scenario.
- Not surprisingly, the timber focus scenario performs well on timber values (but these are a relatively minor part of total economic values); it also performs well on greenhouse gas regulation, because under this scenario there is no restoration of PAWS (Plantation Ancient Woodland Sites) or creation of open habitats, both of which lead to reduced rates of carbon sequestration and substitution. However, the losses in recreation and aesthetic values overshadow the gains.
- The timber benefits alone are less than 50% of the costs; allowing for a similar level of income from recreation and other sources, the model is suggesting that the PFE would fall a little short of breaking even under current conditions.
- **The model suggests that the PFE provides non-market benefits an order of magnitude greater than the costs, providing a substantial subsidy to the nation in the form of non-market benefits, most notably recreation, which is the biggest single benefit at present, and greenhouse gas regulation, which is set to become the largest benefit sometime around 2030, not because of physical changes but because the official value of carbon (DECC 2009) rises steeply over time.**

Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England: social use, value and expectations.

This research compares three aspects of the people-forest relationship:

- Comparison between tenure types: does the PFE provide different, more or fewer benefits than other woodlands?
- Comparison within society: what social benefits do the trees and range of woodlands in the PFE in England provide, and which parts of society currently use them or feel welcome to use them?
- Comparison between woodland types: do particular kinds of woodland in the
- PFE provide different, more or fewer benefits than other parts and to different parts of society?

[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-socialstudy-report.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-socialstudy-report.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-socialstudy-report.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-socialstudy-report.pdf)

Findings:

- 70% of respondents could list values for publicly owned woodlands, while only 55% of respondents could list values for privately owned woodlands.
- All categories of values associated with woodlands are associated more strongly with publicly owned than private ones. Public expectations for future benefits from the PFE were also higher than for comparable benefits from other woodland. For all woodland types they prioritised wildlife habitat provision followed by recreation, landscape conservation, climate change mitigation and education.
- Most participants in the discussion groups expressed a strong wish to maintain or increase the current extent and composition of public woodland ownership. The question of ownership often led participants to share their experiences of “keep out” or “private land” signs and the use of signage in car parks or at the entrance to woodlands as indicating the type of or details about ownership and management.
- There were very few who expressed support for having more woodland in private ownership. Most expressed a wish to keep the existing status quo, or, if anything, to increase the extent of the PFE:
[Disability group, Nottingham]
Interviewer 2: *“How would you feel if the government started to sell off some of its forest?”*
Male 1: *“I think it would be scandalous.”* [Murmurs of agreement]
Male 2: *“Yeah, all wrong.”*
Male 1: *“It would be all wrong.”*
- [Rural, age 55+ group, Farnham]
Female: *“I do think the same; I wouldn’t like to see big swathes of Forestry Commission departing into private ownership because of the lack of control. One wonders if that happened, what the purchasers, owners are really buying it for? What’s their purpose?”*
- [Intensive user group 2, Farnham]
Male: *“I think it’s selling the family silver really, it doesn’t really belong to the government, the Forestry Commission belongs to us, not to one particular government to use for their own political objectives. It’s not us actually, it’s us and our children isn’t it, our grandchildren.”*
- Female: *“Just playing devil’s advocate and not necessarily I think this but if you did sell off areas, would it not possibly lend itself to having more local community involvement and interest expressed? But to the detriment of the current national strategy?”*
Male: *“Who would pay for it? How would the local community ...”*
Female: *“I think the ideal would be to keep it in national ownership and make sure that it’s managed with a local involvement, that would get my ideal because one of the dangers, a bit like the railway isn’t it, you parcel it off and then nobody knows how to get from one place to another and you can’t get a straightforward answer. To me it’s the same with the forest.”*

Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England: social use, value and expectations.

Findings continued:

- Some discussion group participants asked about the cost of managing the PFE, either because they assumed that a profit was generated from timber or because they had become newly aware of the range of benefits offered. Many participants showed surprise at the net figure (£15 million or 30p per person per year) quoted in the public consultation document, and expressed the view that this was 'amazingly good value':
- [Intensive user group, Farnham]
Male: *"This other figure which really amazed me, do you know how much it is per person, per year, to each person in England, the government spends? 30p, that's the £14m divided into, 30p, so if we were all willing to spend 60p [laughs], you could almost, it's almost having a little box in the village shop where people come in and say 'put my 10p change into the charity box'. It's such a trivial amount, yet governments for years have agonised over and said the Forestry Commission, the cost, it doesn't make a profit but 30p for free access to Alice Holt and your motorbikes and your cycling and ..."*
- A substantial part of the public consulted in the discussion groups attached a deeply-held significance to public ownership. This was largely expressed in terms of guaranteed access and, to a lesser extent, 'ability to influence' their management. It was also sometimes expressed in terms of woodlands being an essential part of life and important national resource, which (large parts of it) should be in public ownership. A distinction was made between the PFE and other publicly owned woodlands and forests in terms of the Forestry Commission's special expertise in silviculture and multi-purpose forestry approach.

A richly expressed sense of connection with trees and woodlands means that many regard the PFE as a national natural resource to which society has a right.



Scientific assessment of the delivery of national environmental and biodiversity objectives on the Public Forest Estate

This report looks specifically at the contribution of the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate (PFE) in England to the delivery of environmental benefits as expressed in the Natural Environment aim (Aim 3) of the government's Strategy for England's Trees Woods and Forest (ETWF).

[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-environmentalstatusreport.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-pfe-environmentalstatusreport.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-pfe-environmentalstatusreport.pdf/$FILE/eng-pfe-environmentalstatusreport.pdf)

- **The PFE includes 67,772 ha of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). In 2003, 71% of these SSSIs were classified as being in target condition, i.e.: favourable or unfavourable recovering. By 2009 this figure had risen to 98%. The government target was 95% by 2010.**
- **For woodland SSSIs on the Forestry Commission estate, 99% were in target condition in September 2009 – a better record than for any other land manager (including Natural England and all the conservation charities).**
- There is no fundamental inconsistency between 'conifer plantation' and significant biodiversity importance – for example, Thetford forest and the pine plantations in the Thames basin heath areas have EU conservation designations because of their modern forestry management, and the "State of the UK's Birds 2008" (RSPB 2009) shows woodlark and nightjar populations have exceeded BAP targets "largely due to forestry practices". BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) has described Thetford Forest as being the most important area in East Anglia for woodland birds, heathland birds and farmland birds.
- The wooded habitat of the PFE is comprised of over 151,000 ha of coniferous plantation and more than 66,000 ha of broadleaved woodland. Approximately 24% of this woodland resource is ancient woodland. The area of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) restored to semi-natural woodland increased by 12% from 15,952 ha to 17,842 ha between 2002 and 2009.
- Native Woodland Habitat Action Plan habitats on the PFE have collectively increased from 24,815 ha to 27,224 ha during the five-year period from 2004-2009. These habitats now represent over 10% of the total area of the PFE. UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority open habitats have also increased by 10% since 2004, due to planned and targeted management. A further 12,415 ha of open habitat will be created by the end of current, approved forest design plans.
- **The Public Forest Estate is the largest single land holding in England, and as such can deliver large-scale change or subtle alterations in the wider landscape context.**
- All of the PFE in England is currently certified to the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification scheme. For non-FC woodlands in England, only 16% or 139,000ha are similarly certified.



Finally, a few words from The Woodland Trust

“The Woodland Trust supports the Commission’s objective to make sure that this massive asset delivers public benefits even more effectively than it does now – especially at a time of such massive social, environmental and economic change. If you have an interest in England’s trees, woods and forests you will be interested in the public forest estate.

The Commission is the largest single owner of woodland in England and its estate covers 258,000 hectares (600,000 acres) spread over 1500 woods. If you live close to one (and there is a good chance that you do) then you are a stakeholder in its future and your input could help to make sure it remains within the public estate. Even if you are not close to a FC-owned wood yourself, if you believe as we do that forests and woods in public ownership are an important national asset then now is the time to have your say in their future...”

“We must keep the public forest estate for everyone. Please take this opportunity to make sure the public estate remains open for and owned by the Nation...”

Excerpt from Woodland Trust campaign encouraging its supporters to respond to the 2009 public consultation

OUR forests

Individual members of **Our Forests** are in alphabetical order:

Hen Anderson (Co-founder ‘Save Our Woods’, also manages a smallholding & woodland on Exmoor);
Richard Daniels (Chair of grassroots campaigning group Hands off our Forest (HOOF) in the Forest of Dean));
Dr Gabriel Hemery (chartered forester, co-founder & Chief Executive of the Sylva Foundation);
Tony Juniper (independent environmental advisor, campaigner, writer and former Director of Friends of the Earth);
Rod Leslie (former Chief Executive, Forest Enterprise);
Robin Maynard (environmental campaign consultant);
Jonathon Porritt (Founder Director Forum for the Future and former Chair of UK Sustainable Development Commission).

Further information about **Our Forests** and its work is available via:

Robin Maynard: 07932 040452

See also **Our Forests**’ wider network of like-minded groups and individuals:

<http://www.handsoffourforest.org>

<http://saveourwoods.co.uk>

<http://38degrees.org.uk>

<http://gabrielhemery.com>

<http://www.jonathonporritt.com>

<http://www.tonyjuniper.com>

OUR forests

A people's vision for the future of England's public woods and forests

Along with the over half a million people signing the 38 Degrees' petition, we believe that there are unique values and benefits provided to society from having a national body of woodland and forest owned by and managed sustainably on behalf of the public.

Therefore, as a core principle, **Our Forests** will work to retain and expand what is currently referred to as the 'Public Forest Estate' – but which would better be termed 'Common Wood and Forest Land'.

A short-term aim is to ensure that the 'Independent Panel' frames its recommendations within the findings of the earlier and extensive public consultation concluded just before the change of Government, as well as incorporating the views of the over half a million signatories to 38 Degrees' petition.

Our Forests will also set-out a long-term vision for the future of England's public woods and forests – but one that is genuinely 'A People's Vision' by engaging directly with 'Big Society' via our working partnership with 38 Degrees, as well as through the many local & grassroots groups with whom we are networked.