

UPM Tihill
Trailblazers:
UPM's forest mountain biking centre



UPM Tihill has transformed a plantation in Wales into the UK's leading mountain biking centre. With 44km of purpose-built trails and a popular café and bike shop, Coed Llandegla attracts 200,000 visitors a year and employs 20 local people, while continuing to provide timber.

Background

If you'd visited Coed Llandegla at the turn of the century, you'd have found a typical privately owned plantation: a 650-hectare upland spruce forest planted in the early 1970s, with a few footpaths and parking for eight cars. Today, things are very different: tens of thousands of visitors flock to the forest each year, from families to serious mountain bikers, to horse riders, to birdwatchers hoping to spot rare black grouse.

"In the late nineties the forest was used a handful of times a year for mountain bike competitions," recalls Andrew Heald, forest manager at the time and now sustainable plantations manager at UPM Tihill. "Some riders had suggested we should open a permanent centre at Llandegla.

"As well as adding value to the forest and new income, we were keen to demonstrate that a private sector organization could build a recreational facility that was free at the point of use. It has turned out better than we dared hope."

The project

With support from the government Forestry Commission and rural development funding, UPM Tihill set about creating an extensive network of mountain biking trails and a visitor centre, which includes a café, a cycling shop with bike hire, a bike workshop and meeting room.

"We had to find the right contractors for the trail building and realized there was a skills gap," says senior forest manager Simon Miller, UPM Tihill's resident trail-building expert. "We trained our own people and brought in some who had built motocross trails. We've worked together to make things exciting as well as sustainable. It was important for us to do this on a local level and today our trail-building contractors are all based within 10 miles of the forest."

A company run by two local biking enthusiasts, Oneplanet Adventure, was brought in to run the visitor centre. Their business plan promised to increase the number of visitors to the forest from 60 cars a week before the centre opened in 2005, to 35,000 a year. Last year, there were more than 60,000 car visits.



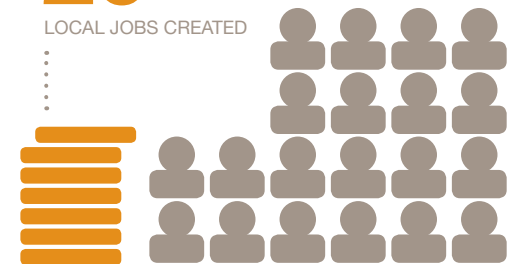
Coed Llandegla's 44km of purpose-built trails attract 200,000 visitors a year.

Photography © Laurence Crossman-Emms, Oneplanet Adventure & UPM Tihill

200,000
VISITORS ATTRACTED TO
COED LLANDEGLA EACH YEAR



20
LOCAL JOBS CREATED



“This ground-breaking project is greatly appreciated by local mountain-bike enthusiasts and family groups alike. CTC, the national cycling charity, believes that this centre demonstrates that a commercial forest can successfully combine conservation and mountain biking in a profitable fashion, and we hope that other forest owners and managers will be inspired to follow this lead.”

Colin Palmer, access adviser to CTC

Benefits

Coed Llandegla has become a hugely popular leisure amenity, attracting visitors from all over Britain. It's also given a direct boost to the local rural economy: the visitor centre now employs 20 local people, and has a turnover of more than £1 million a year.

The conservation value of the forest has improved too. Around half of the population of endangered Welsh black grouse lives in moorland alongside the forest, and it's closely monitored by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Countryside Council for Wales.

For UPM Tilhill, which operates a sawmill nearby, Coed Llandegla provides a superb shop window, showing how wildlife can thrive and people can enjoy themselves within an economically productive plantation (UPM harvests around 3,500 tonnes of timber and biomass from the forest every year). The company often uses the centre for meetings, as well as hosting an annual mountain bike challenge for the UK forest industry.

Next steps

The trees at Coed Llandegla have now reached maturity, and selective harvesting has begun, yielding around 6,000 tonnes of timber per year. New trees are being planted too. UPM Tilhill will use this process to diversify the age structure and the tree species in the forest, creating new habitats for wildlife and making it more attractive for visitors.



The popular visitor centre and café has an annual turnover of more than £1 million.

Photography © Laurence Crossman-Emms, Oneplanet Adventure & UPM Tilhill

