

Plantations in the UK have had a bad reputation. **Luís Neves Silva** of WWF believes that sharing experiences and knowledge is vital for good plantation management

NEW GENERATIONS

Forest mosaics in Brazil © Stora Enso

By the time a conifer planted in the UK today is ready to harvest, the world's population will be pushing ten billion. A growing population, multiplied by spiralling levels of consumption, is putting ever greater pressure on our finite planet. Somehow, we need to find ways to meet people's needs for food, energy and other resources while escaping catastrophic climate change and conserving the ecological life-support systems we all depend on.

Forests are a prominent part of this picture. Modelling from WWF suggests that wood harvesting will need to more than triple by 2050 to meet growing demand for timber and paper in emerging economies and projected increases in bioenergy. And the need for wood could grow still further with advances in the use of timber in construction, bioplastics and in other innovative applications, from pharmaceuticals to LCD screens.

But there's a limit to how much wood we can sustainably extract from natural forests. If we are to increase timber supplies while conserving forests, then we need more plantations.

With an area of 277.9 million hectares in 2015, planted forests represent an increasing proportion of the global forest area, providing a significant and rising share of global roundwood production. Estimates suggest that planted forests have the potential to produce up to two-thirds of global industrial roundwood demand, rising to as much as 80% by 2030.

Plantations have been heavily criticised in the past, sometimes with good reason. Large areas of natural forests, as well as other important ecosystems like wetlands and grasslands, have been converted to monocultures of exotic species – biodiverse ecosystems replaced with so-called 'green deserts'. Some plantations are established without the consent or involvement of people affected by them. Local people may receive little share in the economic benefits; worse, instances exist of indigenous peoples and local communities being displaced or losing access to land for food production.

Yet plantations don't have to be like this. In 2007, WWF launched the New Generation Plantations (NGP) platform alongside a number of companies and government agencies that manage plantations.

The idea was to identify and promote better practices for plantation design and management, and learning and sharing experiences from around the world. Over the last decade, NGP has demonstrated a concept that works: a new generation of plantations that maintain ecosystem integrity, protect and enhance high conservation values, are developed through effective stakeholder involvement processes, and contribute to economic growth and employment.

In Brazil's Atlantic Forest region, for instance, the world's largest pulp producers have developed a landscape mosaic model that combines highly efficient eucalyptus plantations with rainforest restoration on former cattle pasture. In Chile, the major forestry companies have achieved FSC certification, begun restoring previously converted areas of native forest and transformed the way they engage with local communities. In South Africa, best practices developed to minimise the impact of plantations on wetlands have been adopted across the forestry sector. In China, afforestation on a massive scale is benefitting smallholders and the climate alike. NGP study tours have witnessed first-hand examples of conflicts – with indigenous communities, conservationists and cattle ranchers – that have been resolved into opportunities for cooperation.

A key part of the NGP process is about sharing experiences, learning and ideas across countries and cultures, and many of the issues we have encountered will be familiar to UK foresters. In fact, the first NGP meeting was held in Scotland, and the Forestry Commission has participated in the platform since its inception. With trees covering only 13% of the UK land area, compared with the European average of 45%, the UK is hardly a major forest country. But we can learn a lot from its experiences over the last century.

Following two millennia of deforestation, Britain's forest cover had fallen to just 4% by World War One. The strategic imperative of increasing the country's timber reserves led to the formation in 1919 of the Forestry Commission, which has been remarkably successful in increasing Britain's forest area. Over time, the non-timber benefits of these planted forests – including recreation and biodiversity, and latterly carbon sequestration – have become an increasingly important objective.

But this reforestation effort hasn't been without its problems. The British public loves forests – but they don't necessarily love plantations. In Scotland especially, the past blanket planting of non-native Sitka spruce monocultures – often in unsuitable locations and subsidised by questionable tax breaks – damaged the forest industry's reputation and social licence.

In response, planting dropped sharply over the last three decades and shifted away from productive conifer forests to broadleaved native species. While these have brought environmental, social and climate benefits, the UK remains the world's third largest importer of timber after China and Japan – and there's a danger that the forest products industry will face a growing shortage in coming decades if productive forests aren't replaced.

Tree planting now appears to be coming back into favour, at least in Scotland, which aims to increase its annual woodland creation target of 10,000 hectares per year to 15,000 hectares by 2024/2025, mostly delivered by private companies. By following the sustainable forest management criteria set out in the UK Forestry Standard, this new generation of plantations adheres to the NGP principles, comprising a diversity of species and ages, with conservation areas, restored riparian vegetation and recreational opportunities as well as timber production. There is also increased focus on sharing the benefits with communities and providing high-quality rural employment.

Even so, social challenges remain. Although bare uplands overgrazed by sheep may not be natural or provide much ecological benefit, that is the landscape and lifestyle local people are used to. Many people remain suspicious of forestry, and change can't just be imposed without their consent.

The NGP platform doesn't pretend to have all the answers; however, we believe that by coming together to listen to and learn from each other, we can create better solutions.

Useful link

www.newgenerationplantations.org



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