



NEW FOREST ASSOCIATION

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Secretariat to the Independent Panel on Forestry
Defra
Area 3B
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12th July 2011

Dear Sir/Madam

Independent Panel on Forestry

The New Forest Association, a charity formed in 1867 to protect and conserve the New Forest, has considered how best the Terms of Reference fit with the area as it is currently managed. The outcome is shown on the following page. The New Forest is an area of outstanding value both to conservationists and the public at large. It is hugely attractive to visitors because of the mix of open heathlands and lawns, interspersed with wetlands and the remnants of the old broadleaved forest - the mighty oaks and beeches. This variety has survived, although covering a much smaller area than formerly, despite previous national policy guidelines. Over the last 200 years large conifer plantations have reduced the beauty as well as the bio-diversity of much of the New Forest, effectively sterilising large swathes.

It is clear from applying the Terms of Reference that the New Forest does not sit well with national policy and should be managed as a separate unit. Bearing in mind fresh thinking in the Lawton Report and the National Environment White Paper together with considerations of the effects of climate change there exists an opportunity to repair the damage of two centuries. This area allows links to the Avon Valley and Cranborne Chase offering possibilities for an Ecological Restoration Zone to provide huge benefit to the nation.

Our vision would be a landscape free of intensive commercial forestry where historic woodlands are allowed to develop naturally providing sustainable products, supporting the rural economy. Access and recreation throughout the forest would be provided in a way that respects the wild qualities of the New Forest and its exceptional value. Our vision for the open forest is of restored historic landscapes of extensive open heath, pasture woodland, rivers and streams and valley mires with a management regime focused on conserving these habitats and wildlife, in a way that is commensurate with their many designations.

With good landscape wide management, unhindered by national softwood production objectives, there is a real opportunity to bring this about whilst encouraging a sustainable economy and allowing people to appreciate the natural forest.

The New Forest has a spiritual importance to millions of visitors. Its woods, streams, heaths and mires are part of the last real 'Royal Forest,' damaged, but still intact. Its tranquillity and 'wilderness,' which have the ability to inspire works of art and its 'healing' capability in a modern world, are as important as its nature conservation value.



Question 1 National Policy, whatever it is, cannot fit all areas.

Question 2 The New Forest is a part of the Crown Estate which contains much besides land currently used for conifer plantations.

Question 3a Increasing woodland cover is inappropriate because of the nature conservation designations of the land managed:- SAC/SPA/Ramsar/SSSI.

Question 3b There is a huge opportunity to enhance public benefit offered by the New Forest by removing the requirement for commercial softwood. This would allow for regeneration of the native broad-leaves where appropriate and restoration of lawns and heathland. Virtually all of the criteria in this section could be met at the stroke of a pen thereby starting the process of restoring the New Forest to its former glory. The timber industry could be supplied with softwood for perhaps 50 or 60 years. The benefits to bio-diversity and opportunities for climate change mitigation along with appropriate public access are immense.

Question 3c Retention of local expertise would be important. There should be savings as the need to fence, nurse and thin young conifers is removed. Much of the broad-leaved tree cover will be by natural regeneration after some expense in removing traces of the old plantations.

Question 3d The Crown Estate in the New Forest is considerably more than the area open to the public. It consists of housing stock used by both Forestry workers and Commoners as well as back up land. It is, in the main, the residue of Lyndhurst Manor, formed in Medieval times. It is very much a unit that supports the important basis of the New Forest, the commoning community and should therefore be retained in its entirety. Management of the New Forest by the Forestry Commission is merely an accident of history. The Forest owes its unique character and survival to the commoners grazing their stock which has brought about the open heaths, lawns, pasture woodlands and wetlands we see today. The conflicts with timber growers are legion and go back centuries. There is a case for easing the burden on the Forestry Commission by removing them from the area totally.

Question 3e The value for money that the New Forest provides is incalculable. On one level it could be claimed that with say 13 million visitors per annum and a net cost to the government of £3m that twenty three pence a visitor is incredible value for a place offering clean air, tranquillity, health and a real chance to re-create in the original meaning of the word. In addition there is a huge and ongoing benefit to the local economy through tourism spending.

How the Forest is cared for is more important than who cares for it. Retaining state ownership under new landscape managers with policy guidelines reflecting its unique status is an option. Gifting or leasing to a suitable charity with a realistic endowment, whilst ensuring that adequate safeguards as to its future management and accountability are included is another.

Yours faithfully

Peter Roberts
Chairman

Appendix A contains detailed, sourced, paragraphs supporting our point of view.
Appendix B *Recovering Lost Landscapes*, a document we produced in 2006, provides a critique of the progress of the Forest Design Plan and how it might be improved.



Appendix A

The New Forest is of exceptional importance for biodiversity. This is reflected in its many designations, with some 20 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, six Natura 2000 sites and two Ramsar Convention sites included at least partly within the National Park boundary. The Forest is the largest area of semi-natural vegetation in lowland Britain, and includes large tracts of heathland, valley mire and ancient pasture woodland, three habitats that are now fragmented and rare throughout lowland western Europe. The species richness of many groups is very high compared to the national situation. For example, more than two thirds of the British species of reptiles and amphibians, butterflies and moths, fish, bats, dragonflies and damselflies are found in the area. Even for those groups that are less well represented, at least one sixth of all British species have been recorded. In every group considered, the New Forest is home to species of national conservation concern, and in some groups, the numbers of such species is very substantial; for example 155 vascular plant species, 264 butterflies and moths, and 142 lichens (Newton 2010).

The high biodiversity value of the New Forest can largely be attributed to the low-input pastoral patterns of land use, and most notably the maintenance of a traditional commoning system, which became formalised in late medieval times (Tubbs 2001). This permits local people ('commoners') to use the Forest to support their livestock (cattle, ponies, pigs and donkeys). Many of the species and habitats that now characterise the New Forest are dependent on maintenance of this form of land use for their survival.

At the same time, the New Forest is also of exceptional importance for recreation. Visitor numbers have increased markedly in recent decades, and today the National Park receives some 13.5 million day visitors per year. The New Forest also contains the largest area of open access land in the lowlands of England (Chatters 2009). For these reasons, the New Forest can genuinely be described as a 'Heritage Forest', comprising an outstanding national asset.

The Forestry Commission took over responsibility for managing the New Forest in 1923. In accordance with national forestry policy, timber production became the primary management goal. Many native broadleaved woods were subjected to silvicultural intervention and extensive areas were converted to plantations of exotic conifers, with a consequent reduction in conservation value (Tubbs 2001).

The Forestry Commission's Open Forest management has been carried out well, in recent years, and has produced some of the best heathlands in Europe. This is supported by the grazing system managed by the Verderers who have a legal responsibility for the Open Forest (New Forest Acts 1877-1970). These activities should continue, regardless of who in future is responsible for managing the New Forest.

The NFA believes that the continuing management of the New Forest for timber is inappropriate, given the outstanding value of the area both for wildlife and for people. In particular:

Conifer plantations still cover large areas, having a major negative impact on the aesthetic value of the landscape. In addition, they fragment internationally rare habitats.

Forestry operations in the Inclosures continue to damage the archaeology of the New Forest; even grade I listed monuments have suffered in recent years.



Red Needle Blight and other diseases are affecting planted conifers. This encourages experimentation with other types of conifer, and non-native species such as *Eucalyptus*, which if established will prove to be a costly mistake.

The New Forest has enormous potential for increasing its biodiversity and landscape beauty, as well as its value for recreation. At present, many of its habitats are in poor condition as a result of mis-management in previous decades (Newton 2010). There is an urgent need for habitat restoration, to address this problem. The NFA believes that the New Forest should be considered as a candidate ERZ, in line with the findings of the Lawton report.

Restoration is held back by a subsidised forestry culture, which continues fencing and planting conifers, and remains largely unaccountable and uneconomic. Large-scale habitat restoration would strengthen the resilience of the New Forest to environmental change, as envisaged by Lawton et al. (2010), and would add value to the public experience in the largest area of access land in Southern England.

Future management of timber should focus on supporting the local timber industry, which would still have a supply of soft woods for the next fifty or sixty years without any further plantings. No further establishment of non-native trees should occur in the New Forest, and non-native plantations should be returned to native woodlands. The broad-leaved plantations would continue to supply timber on a long rotation. These Inclosures help diversify the species sensitive to grazing and support local businesses.

It is essential for the survival of Commoning that the Crown Estate is maintained as a unit. The forest cottages together with the freehold fields are the main stay of the Forest's 'Back up Land' and support a substantial part of the commoning system. Large numbers of grazing stock are necessary to maintain this unique landscape and its internationally important habitats (Ivey 2005).

Literature cited

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- Chatters, C. (2009) *Flowers of the Forest. Plants and people in the New Forest National Park*. WILDGuides, Hampshire.
- Ivey, J. (2005) *New Forest Commoners' Housing Review*, NFA/NFCDA/HIWNT. (See below)
- Lawton, J.H., et al (2010) *Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network*. Report to Defra, London.
- Newton, A.C. (ed.). (2010a) *Biodiversity in the New Forest*. Pisces Publications, Newbury, Hampshire.
- Tubbs, C.R. (2001) *The New Forest. History, ecology and conservation*. New Forest Ninth Centenary Trust, Lyndhurst.

Appendix B

The Forest Design Plan – Recovering Lost Landscapes, 2006, New Forest Association; is a critique of the failure by the Forestry Commission to allow felled areas on rare habitats to revert to nature as intended in Natura 2000. It offers a positive alternative:-

http://www.newforestassociation.org/Recovering_Lost_Landscapes.pdf

<http://www.newforestassociation.org/new-forest-commoners-housing-review.pdf>