



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Russell, David, "Forestry and the Art of Frying Small Fish."
Environmental Values 7, no. 3, (1998): 281-289.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5751>

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Forestry and the Art of Frying Small Fish

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ABSTRACT: This paper is in the form of a narrative exploration of trees and woods. It embraces both the rational and the non-rational dimensions of experience, and mingles science with a little fancy. It begins by questioning some contemporary attitudes towards woods, then proceeds to consider how they function, it continues with some reflections on the cultural significance of trees and woods, and concludes with some ideas on the implications for woodland management.

KEYWORDS: woods, forestry, ecosystem dynamics, significance

You should rule a country as you would fry a small fish; lightly.

Lao Tsu, Tao te Ching

I have used a quotation from the Tao Te Ching in the title of this paper because it captures the need, which I believe is essential, for sensitivity and humility in our approach to conservation management. I take the view that working in conservation requires an open mind and a willingness not to interfere without good cause. I hope to be able to show why. Something of the same idea is expressed in the Zenrin:

Sitting quietly doing nothing,
Spring comes; the grass grows by itself.

Watts (trans.) 1957, The Way of Zen

It may be better that we should understand and work with the flow of natural change rather than invest in continuous and perhaps ultimately futile battle.

QUESTIONS ABOUT ATTITUDES

I think that most of the time most of us are inclined to over-emphasise the scientific, instrumental and rational as the proper basis for decision making and pretend that values, preferences and most certainly, fancies are subjective,

Environmental Values 7 (1998): 281–9
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private and consequently irrelevant. However, more claims are made for objectivity than is reasonable. It cannot determine whatever is a matter of preference and it cannot provide a complete account of our experience of the world.

When this [the scientific investigation of nature] happens, the Nature which 'stirs and strives', which assails us and enthrals us as landscape, remains hidden. The botanist's plants are not the flowers of the hedgerow; the 'source' which the geographer establishes for a river is not the 'springhead in the dale'. (Heidegger, quoted in Howarth 1995)

John Fowles writes of an encounter with some orchids which shows how a (temporarily) narrow curiosity can miss the point:

... a few years ago in France ... I came on my first Soldier Orchid ... I fell on my knees before it in the way that all botanists will know. I identified, to be quite certain with Professors Clapham Tutin and Warburg in hand ... I measured, I photographed, I worked out where I was on the map for future reference. I was excited, very happy ... yet five minutes after my wife had finally torn me away, I suffered a strange feeling. I realised that I had not actually *seen* the plants in the little colony we had found. (Fowles 1992)

John Muir, on the other hand, while wandering along the banks of a stream, during a long trek through the wildlands of North America came across two plants of the orchid *Calypso borealis*:

I felt as if I were in the presence of superior beings who loved me and beckoned me to come. I sat down beside them and wept for joy. (quoted in Norton 1991)

If we are going to succeed in understanding what is a wood (or what is Nature) we need to acknowledge that purely scientific or statistical analysis will take us only so far and indeed may deny us a richer experience of the reality. We must at least acknowledge that value judgements are implicit in conservation and respect the aesthetic roots which nurture preferences. Perhaps we should be prepared to allow the possibility that the numinous power of Nature is also real and might one day overwhelm us as it did John Muir.

There is another attitude that I want to question. Foresters have been frying one particular fish since the mid nineteenth century: 'practicable forestry must yield economic rewards'. Now, some foresters aspire to the production of great trees, straight and tall like gun barrels, and we should recognise that there may be no finer expression of the fulfilment of their art. The results, in the passing of time, can be wonderful. It is more worrying that other foresters seem to have been utterly seduced by the balance sheet; for the argument that only the possibility of revenue can motivate management continues to run – most recently in a draft document 'Towards a Framework for Forestry' from an advisory committee to the UK's Forestry Commission (1996).

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A lot depends on what you mean by forestry, but there is no doubt that woodland management need *not* yield economic returns and yet still be perfectly viable and sustainable. Kingsley (1988) reports that researchers in America during the 1970s, using focus groups, compared the management aims of woodlot owners with those of the foresters that they employed. While the foresters tended to assume that timber yield was always a priority only 2% of owners owning 5% of the wooded land concurred. They had many other reasons for owning woods, not least their delight in hunting and in being in woods. It is having a reason to *care* about woods which is important, and that is not inevitably correlated with financial gain.

Let me make it clear that I am not arguing against the need for productive forestry, far from it. But I am suggesting that we need to be less blinkered in our understanding of people's reasons for owning woods and the range of benefits that woodlands provide. In comparison to the US, relatively little research effort is devoted to this in the UK.

Just as it is important not to see woods solely as a resource of timber or cellulose, so conservationists need to be careful not to understand woods purely as habitat or to understand Nature purely in terms of species diversity. As Heidegger suggests, woods are also Places. A wood may have an international significance as a habitat or monument but it is brought alive by people working and using the land as well as by the memories and associations invested by individuals and communities. We cannot claim fully to understand woods (or Nature) unless we also recognise and appreciate their social, aesthetic and cultural significance. I will return to one way that woods might have a profound cultural significance which is almost certainly under-appreciated by conservationists but first I intend to reflect on one more question about attitudes, which I will call the status quo problem.

Woodland conservation is quite typically premised on the assumption that ecosystems do not change despite the fact that science reveals that they do. Paul Gobster, a researcher with the US Department of Agriculture, identifies the role that aesthetics might play in this misconception. He argues that we have inherited 'a narrowly defined and largely visual aesthetic' and goes on to suggest that what is needed is an ecological aesthetic which would require 'a learned experience of the multi modal, dynamic qualities of forest environments and appreciates both subtle and dramatic changes exhibited in the cycle of life and death' (Gobster 1996). What might this mean?

WOODLAND AS PROCESS

In October 1987 an exceptionally fierce storm assailed southeastern England. It challenged and sometimes transformed prevailing ideas about woods. For many people it was and still is a catastrophic intrusion which destroyed places of

inexpressible beauty. Wild nature had intruded upon the ordered sensibilities of South East England. The first thought was to clear away the mess and plant new trees.

It was genuinely traumatic for those caught up in it. A wind that could in less than an hour uproot tens of thousands of trees is awesome. Such storms have a return periodicity in excess of 200 years (Burt and Mansfield 1988). Those with cause to reflect recognised that the woods of South East England have been shaped by many such storms over many centuries. Certainly the woods were beautiful but can we discover a natural beauty no less powerful in the response of those woodland systems following the storm?

The clearing and tree planting was part of a healing process for local communities and managers who have loved the woods. However, now we can see that in many cases the planting is in danger of being overwhelmed by natural tree regeneration. It is interesting to look more carefully at what is going on.

The woods were not, of course, destroyed – merely altered. Most significant for foresters is the way that fallen trees nurture regeneration. The tops protect at least a proportion of seedlings from deer. They provide a benign microclimate which prevents the desiccation of young plants not yet rooted in the moist mineral soil and so still vulnerable in the deep dry superficial leaf litter and humus. They will also release nutrients as they decay. Not extracting all the timber and burning the tops avoids compaction or erosion of the soil and in many cases the cost of extraction and planting was far greater than the value of the timber recovered.

While it is certainly true that you never go into the same wood twice however often you visit it, it is much more obviously the case after such a catastrophic event. The once relatively stable woodlands are now chaotic, changing rapidly. Invertebrates and fungi in the dead wood may be flourishing but the species composition is changing. Beech woods may not be dominated by beech again for many decades, if at all, and as new species colonise other species will go for ever.

Pollen diagrams provide a graphic demonstration of the ‘subtle and dramatic changes’ which Gobster highlights. Johnny’s Wood in Borrowdale is an ancient semi-natural woodland, an important site for Atlantic bryophytes and lichens. The pollen diagram (figure 1) indicates ancient patterns of change.

What we see is an image of a woodland through time (several millennia). The dark shaded areas indicate the largest accumulations of pollen and the deeper the layer the older it is. A horizontal line at any depth indicates a contemporary assemblage of pollen producers. There are indications of a number of major catastrophic events during the last few thousand years. They may be natural or they may be anthropogenic, I don’t know. But each has resulted in a dramatic change in the relative abundance of pollen, with corresponding changes in the dominant vegetation. We can see that juniper has given way to willow then hazel then alder and finally oak. The latest catastrophic change is almost certainly a

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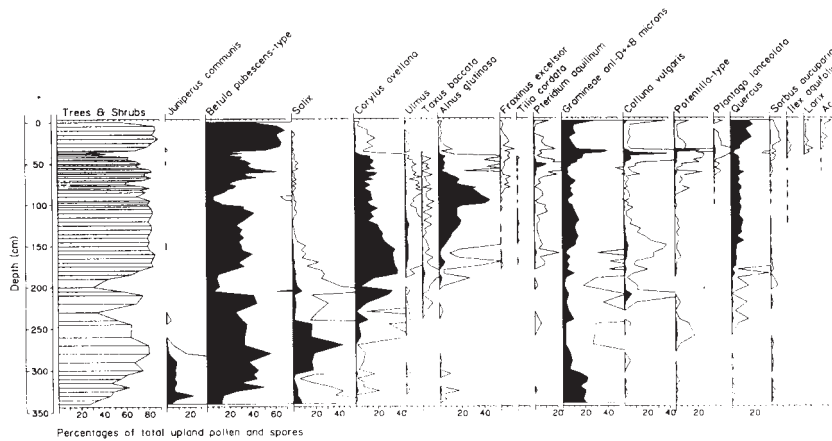


FIGURE 1. Pollen diagram for Johnny's Wood in Borrowdale (Birks 1993)
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Viking clearance dated at around 900 AD. Since then the wood has been dominated by oak, a condition sustained largely by coppice management because of its economic value. But what we now see as an oakwood is in fact a dynamic system only more or less stable as environmental and biotic influences bring new pressures to bear and generate changes in the component species within the system.

However, this is an ancient semi-natural woodland and the tendency of popular conservation is to preserve such systems in their present condition (or if it has been 'degraded' to 'restore' it to a former more natural state). This might entail measures to encourage the regeneration of the oak, for example. It is less usual, but perhaps more useful to identify and protect the processes which allow the wood to continue to function as a wood while climate and other environmental influences change as we know they will.

Pollen diagrams like this show that there is no single condition more 'natural' than any other to which restoration might be directed. The component species of natural systems are in flux. Changes which have occurred in the assemblages of plants and animals are only partly reversible and we recognise that each phase of vegetation cover is contingent both on what has already happened and on new environmental circumstances.

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TREES
AND WOODS

Recognising the processes of woodlands is going part of the way to understanding their significance. Appreciating the features of well loved places and the way they evoke a particular set of aesthetic responses takes us a little further. But there is another dimension which conservationists have so far treated sceptically if at all: woods also have a significance because of associations in individual and collective memory (fairy tales, myths, legends).

I can only offer a brief survey of some of the ideas which might contribute to a deeper understanding of the meaning of trees and woods. This is the 'non-rational and fanciful' element of the narrative and parts of it at least need to be approached cautiously. This is the realm of the will-o-the-whisp; the Snark that can turn out to be a Boojum; the half remembered, half understood elements of magic and fantasy: elusive, never constant, always changing shape. It is nevertheless a way of approaching the numinous quality in Nature which is part of the reality most of us acknowledge.

The United States Forestry Service has recently undertaken research into trees and their relation to the human psyche as reflected in dreams, myths and cultural traditions (Schroeder 1991). They quickly realised that people objecting to the felling of old growth stands had invested the now famous Spotted Owl with a significance that is largely emblematic. It had become a metaphor expressing a deeper significance, perhaps the same romantic sense of spiritual awe that John Muir experienced with the orchids in the example quoted above, but also evident in people's responses to the great trees in the 'sacred groves' of the Yosemite National Park which Muir helped to found.

After discussing the role of sacred groves in the (certainly bloody) religious practices amongst the Greeks and in the Celtic north, Robert Harrison (1992) recounts how, in Crete, both wooden and stone pillars were used to harbour the souls of the sacred trees and he suggests that if a single column once symbolised a sacred tree, a cluster of columns may well have symbolised a sacred grove. The soaring pillars and fan vaulting of the great Gothic cathedrals replicate the architecture of the forest. This congruence is strikingly evident, for example, in the so called 'Cathedral Beech Groves' of Southern England and for many people woods have all the qualities of sacred places.

The tree has figured in many myths and even in a sceptical age like ours, the tree is still brought into the house and decorated at Christmas; it is also venerated in tree dressing ceremonies. (Richard Mabey [1996] describes a tree beside a well, an important juxtaposition of forces, which had been killed by copper poisoning as a result of the coins which had been embedded in its trunk.) It can be a symbol of defiance against road building or supermarkets, and people want to plant trees to commemorate rites of passage or other major life events. Reaching from below the surface of the soil towards the sky the tree connects the

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chthonic and aerial, the dark and the light, the dead and the living, the unconscious and the conscious. It is the World Tree and the Tree of Life upon which deities are hanged for the gaining of knowledge (Odin), or the saving of the world (Christ); it is the source of the knowledge of good and evil.

Gardens are designed to reflect ideas of nature. In *The Renaissance Garden* Roy Strong describes some of the earliest of these designs. At the centre of the seventeenth century wilderness at Wilton there is a statue, surrounded by plants set out in the representation of cosmic order that characterised mannerist gardens. It is Dionysus, an epiphany of Wild Nature. When he entered the city of Thebes Maenads ran riotously out of the town and, when they discovered their mysteries had been observed by a man, tore him apart with their bare hands. But here as the last wolf is being killed in England, he is set and is himself emasculated in an ordered arrangement of walkways and shrubs. Dionysus is important as a reminder that nature is not benign. We cannot afford to be sentimental. Mother Nature has many children but no favourites. No narrative of Nature is complete without the Dionysian.

Camille Paglia (1995) says the Dionysian is

the Chthonian reality, the dehumanising brutality of biology and geology, the Darwinian waste and bloodshed, the squalor and rot we must block from our consciousness to retain our integrity as persons. Western science and aesthetics are attempts to revise this horror into imaginatively palatable forms.

Nature is not cosy, and woods are surely places in which a certain anarchy is possible. Robert Pogue Harrison (1992) describes how woods are places in which ‘inversions’ occur: the law of the land is turned on its head as the outlaw becomes the defender of the good (Robin Hood), virtuous knights become wild animals having been spurned by their ladies (Ariosto, Mallory etc.), genders are switched, sprites and fairies walk abroad and a man assumes an ass’s head (Shakespeare). Forests are places which turn everything upside down. Is it possible that in doing so they allow us to see ourselves more clearly?

National identities may be derived in part from the forest. In *Landscape and Memory* Simon Schama (1995) characterises an English ‘idea’ of woodland in a chapter titled ‘The Liberties of the Greenwood’. Like Harrison, he explains how the Greenwood in the legends of Robin Hood was a place of

loyalty, honour, courage and even sometimes a brusque kind of Franciscan piety...in painful contrast to their disappearance from the modern world of court and state.

And he goes on to show how the oak woods came to symbolise England’s strength. He quotes Batty Langley (1728):

But should we ever happen (which God forbid) to be obliged to purchase some of their [foreign] timber for our Shipping (by want thereof at Home) ’tis to be feared that this glorious Nation that governs the Seas must submit to every invasion that’s made, for want of its wooden Walls of defence.

Such ideas have contributed to the idea of the English forest; perhaps its no wonder that conifer plantations of the dark Germanic school of forestry have seemed so alien a place, in which from our childhood reading of Grimm's Fairy Tales we might imagine arise all the terrors of the night rather than the virtues of the human soul. Schama's argument is that landscapes are formed as much in the mind as in the world of nature. Myths and legends shape the way that we see; they become part of the scenery.

CONCLUSION:

In the course of this paper I have referred extensively to the need to understand significance. This is particularly true in conservation management. Alan Holland and Kate Rawles (1993) have suggested that 'conservation is about negotiating the transition from past to future in such a way as to secure the transfer of maximum significance'. But it is also true in the realm of 'productive forestry'. Understanding what woodlands mean, how they are used and how they work is now more often recognised as the general starting point for forestry management. Most foresters are sensitive to the complex significance of woodland and there are seen to be economic as well as environmental arguments in favour of minimum intervention (near-natural) woodland management (Spilsbury 1990).

Understanding woods and their management needs requires careful, open minded reflection and some guidance is needed for managers who may not be naturally reflective. One possible framework for this guidance might be:

- What is this place (including its contexts)? (*significance*)
- What happens if we do nothing? (*process*)
- What could it be (in itself and as part of something bigger)? (*vision*)
- What can we not avoid doing? (*action*)

I have explored some aspects of ecosystem dynamics and contrasted these ideas with popular preferences for maintaining the status quo. There is a lot we do not know about ecosystem dynamics and it would be presumptuous to suggest that we can provide a definitive solution to the second of the questions listed above, but we can go some way towards an answer.

It is impossible to generalise about a vision, and it is equally difficult to generalise about the level of intervention that is needed to achieve that vision, but let me close with a personal view.

Firstly, woods must be appreciated as both a biological and a cultural phenomenon. We should not attempt to develop our appreciation of these aspects in isolation.

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Secondly, conservation will not ultimately succeed unless it can accommodate the *processes* of nature. This will mean promoting an ecological aesthetic to complement the usual largely visual aesthetic.

And, rather than engaging in preservation or restoration, we need to plan new landscapes within which species and ecosystems can operate dynamically. This requires a grand scale of conservation planning but not necessarily more intervention. It implies that we need to give more space to 'wild nature'. In the UK the National Trust is doing this experimentally on a small scale in Cumbria, by taking land adjacent to woods out of agricultural use (with the full co-operation of the farmers) and letting happen what will.

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