

Public Forest Estate Categories:

A Heritage Perspective

By Prof Peter J Howard PhD, RD, FRGS



We are very happy to share here an exclusive article written for us by Professor Howard, a heritage landscape expert. It is an insightful piece that, among other things, cuts through the Governments assertions that our Public Forest Estate can be split into just four categories.

The division of the public forest lands into four categories does not flow naturally from current attitudes to landscape and heritage, nor from the current wish for greater community involvement at the local level. Rather it seems to indicate a top-down habit of mind which led to the zoning activities in cities in the 1950s. There are several fundamental objections to this mind-set, which an examination of the map of the different types does nothing to allay.

The most important, perhaps, is that it stems from a belief in monoculture, that each piece of land should only have one predominating purpose. Given the current population and future trends, the needs for food security, there is a widespread move towards multi-functional agriculture, and much further, that we cannot encourage now any piece of land to have only a single purpose, be it a golf course, a suburb, a coast or a forest, or even a nature reserve. This is recognised in nearly all forest land at present, and on a very small scale. Small forests of 10 hectares may have parts that are used for community access, other parts for industrial conifer production, others for an sculpture park, and a piece for a nature reserve. Giving vast areas of forest a single designation may possibly reflect the future desired by the government; it certainly does not represent the present situation.

The designation Heritage Forest gives us yet another 'heritage' designation in a country where the quantity of land specially designated is already very high, and where there is a plethora of designations. No doubt much of these Heritage Forests may already be, or be part of, a National Park, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, an Environmentally Sensitive Area, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, a country park, SSSI, National of Local Nature Reserve or many more. This is at a time when recent heritage thinking, encapsulated in the European Landscape Convention, to which the UK has ratified, is moving in the opposite direction.

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The Convention has several major thrusts, but one is the move towards participation, significantly though not exclusively with local people, a move which chimes very nicely with present government initiatives. There is another strong move towards measuring the landscape's importance not by some expert-imposed aesthetic classification, but by its meanings local people, not just visually but also with the other senses. These certainly support the concept of community forests, but there is no sign in the map that the distinctions made have any connection with landscape meaning.

A third major thrust of the convention is towards 'ordinary landscapes' noting that very mundane landscapes may have deep meanings for people. So the distinction between special 'heritage' forests and others flies quite contrary to this thinking. The Convention applies to the entire territory of the signatory parties, from the national parks through to industrial sites. All landscapes need to be 'protected, managed and enhanced' to different degrees. Forests, however commercial, are not exempt from the Convention.

The system of four types, scheduled with such little detail, takes no cognizance of these new directions in landscape and heritage thinking, other than the suggestion for a degree of community involvement, which are now part of UK law.

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