

THE INSTITUTE OF CHARTERED FORESTERS

Climate smart Forestry

27th April 2022 Glasgow Address by Bishop James Jones KBE

Chair of the Independent Panel on Forestry (10th Anniversary)

It is a huge honour as an honorary forester to be invited to give your closing address in this the 10th year since the Independent Panel on Forestry published its Report on the future of forestry. A Report widely regarded as ground-breaking. I'm sorry not to be with you in person not least because Glasgow is the city of my birth – that may surprise you as I bear the name Jones. My father was Welsh but my mother was a Scot. And by the Law of Resultant Forces I was therefore bound to end up in Liverpool!

I was once doing Thought for the Day on Radio 4 when Scotland were playing Wales at Cardiff Arms Park. Given my divided loyalties I thought I would end my thought by saying 'May the best man win!'. Even better I thought I would say it both in Gaelic and Welsh. When I rang a professor of Welsh Studies at the University of Wales and asked him for the Welsh for 'May the best man win' there was a pause then 'there is no such phrase in the Welsh language!'.

I went to the primary school in Melville Street in Pollockshields and my first experience of open green space was Maxwell Park. Glasgow like Liverpool benefitted from the 19th Century philanthropists who knew that trees and green spaces were vital to the health of growing urban populations.

And my first vivid experience of woodland was the forest around Scone Palace when my father was posted by the army to Perth. My taste for nature literally began by picking rosehips from the hedge rows and potatoes during the tatty howking holidays in the days when you spent the whole day bent double over the earth.

It is truly fitting that your conference on Climate Smart Forestry should be here in Glasgow following COP 26 which acknowledged the global importance of trees. The City's Motto follows the words of its Patron Saint Mungo and his prayer 'Let Glasgow Flourish'. It could have been the motto for COP 26 'Let the Earth Flourish'. Indeed your own conference about the vital importance of trees to the changing climate is in the end about the flourishing of the Earth.

But in this the 10th Anniversary year of the publication of the Report on the Independent Panel on Forestry I'm here to do one thing. You may recall that the Government was taken by surprise and taken aback by the huge public resistance to its proposal to dispose of its public forests. It set up the Independent Panel. If I could sum up its thousands of words in 15 words it would be:

"Would that wood would become the roots of a green economy and a greener culture." The Panel showed incontrovertibly that wood is good; good for nature, good for people, good for business; and that we lose sight of the value of our trees at our peril.

But the one thing that I have come to do is to say 'thank you', for you are the ones who put in the hard graft to prove that wood is good for business; you, the foresters, are the ones that bear the brunt of the imperative to plant more trees. I would also like to acknowledge publicly and to thank Shireen Chambers who made an outstanding contribution to the work of the Panel not just by representing your interests which she did brilliantly but by leading the way in pioneering a spirit of partnership across all the varied and competing interests in the world of forestry.

The Panel Report was signed off unanimously! Even the Ramblers and the Country Landowners agreed!

In the Foreword to the Report I wrote:

“Our forests and woods are nature’s playground for the adventurous, museum for the curious, hospital for the stressed, cathedral for the spiritual, and a livelihood for the entrepreneur. They are a microcosm of the cycle of life in which each and every part is dependent on the other; forests and woods are the benefactor of all, purifying the air that we breathe and distilling the water of life. In short, trees are for life.”

This quote from the Foreword showed the range of interests in our forests and woodlands, from recreation to woodland industry, and demonstrated the necessity of finding a way for the different stakeholders to work together with one another in partnership.

One of the positive aspects of the Covid Pandemic was the way during Lockdown when we were allowed to go out for our hour of exercise so many made their way to parks and woodlands to re-connect with nature through trees – they were indeed a ‘hospital for the stressed’.

At the outset of the Panel’s work we decided that we would split up into small groups and tour the country visiting forests so that we could listen to the voices of stakeholders. We also invited written submissions about the future of forests and received over 40,000.

I remember that on the first site visit to the Forest of Dean we were taken by the local forester to a vantage point to survey the scope and scale of the Forest’s mighty Oak Trees. I made some naive comment about the wonder of nature and was immediately challenged by our host,

“No, Bishop. That’s not a natural landscape, that’s a political landscape. Those trees were planted over 200 years ago to build ships of war for the British Navy.”

Those words have never left me and have taught me an important truth that, in fact, every landscape is a political landscape for every landscape reveals the priorities and values of that generation.

Once trees were planted for building ships and for digging trenches in war. In fact, the Forestry Commission was set up in 1919 to replenish the forests that were felled to build trenches for the First World War. Now they are to be grown for an even more global battle, this time with an earth-threatening and changing climate. Today's priorities and values are expressed by your conference title: "Climate Smart Forestry".

The Independent Panel on Forestry produced 31 Recommendations and its Report was welcomed by all political parties. We recommended establishing a woodland culture for the 21st Century, abandoning the sale of our national forests and keeping them in trust for the nation because trees are good for people. We recommended integrating trees and woodlands into public policy about the environment and climate change because they are good for nature – and at COP 26 in Glasgow and in agricultural policy that is now happening. We recommended incorporating trees and woodlands into an expanding green economy not just in rural but in urban settings too because it is clear that such an investment is good for the whole economy. We recommended drawing up a Charter for Trees similar to the initiative in 1919 with specially appointed Guardians to ensure that this extraordinary arboreal capital should be invested in the well-being of our society. That Charter has yet to be seen!

For my own memory's sake I've listed today's priorities alphabetically A to G:

A is for Access to Recreation both physical and mental

B is for Biodiversity and the wealth of wild life

C is for Carbon and Climate and Creation's Continuing existence

D is for Disease limitation and Pest extermination

E is for Ecosystem Services

F is for Forest expansion and management

G is for Growth in woodland industry and skills

I feel these are all consonant with the 7 principles of Regenerative Forestry. They were set out in the Spring Edition of TREES by Clive Thomas of the Soil Association:

1. Is the forest in better condition than before?
2. Is it locking up more carbon?
3. Is it home to more nature?
4. Is it supporting local people and livelihoods?
5. Is it contributing to a diverse and ecologically functioning landscape?
6. Is it more resilient?
7. Can it continue to do all this into the foreseeable future?

As I have read the journals of the Institute of Chartered Foresters the point is being made over and over again that forest expansion requires commensurate expansion of management and skills.

It is all very well for people and politicians to chant that we need more trees! That's good and to be welcomed! But you cannot plant millions more trees without recognising that you need many more foresters. One of the things that we discovered on the Panel was that that there was serious neglect of woodland management across the sector especially amongst private landlords.

There is now a recognition that planting trees is not a simple panacea for our climate catastrophe. The right trees have to be planted in the right places and managed in the right way. That is why we need you and your Institute.

You cannot just leave it to nature!

That brings me to a serious philosophical point!

It is about how humanity sees itself in relation to nature. One of the positive steps we have taken in our understanding of nature is that we have moved away from seeing humanity as separate and APART FROM nature and moved closer to the view that humanity is integral to and A PART OF nature.

If that is true, and I believe that it is, then to those who say 'plant the trees and leave it to nature' three cheers! Leaving it to nature involves foresters playing their part. And if trees are essential to nature so are foresters equally essential.

I gather from your house journal that the current woodland expansion requires a 72% increase in the forest workforce. That's a figure the general public never hears when the clamour for more trees fills their ears.

Never have the skills of foresters been so needed and so in demand.

Foresters are part of the woodland ecology as well as the woodland economy.

I came across a review in the Daily Telegraph of a book by Suzanne Simard called 'Finding the Mother Tree'. Under the title 'Welcome to the Wood Wide Web' the author Richard Mabey summarised the thesis of her research 'that woodland trees are linked by underground fungal threads, through which nutrients, water and information are equitably shared.' Mabey adds the insight, "The forest is a co-operative". I like that idea. And if that is so then foresters are a part of that co-operative!

The Global Tree Assessment has estimated that a third of the world's trees are at risk of extinction. The threat includes oaks and magnolias. It underlines the need for expert forest services and the importance of your Institute.

Once upon a time it was said that the whole of these islands were covered by forests, so much so that you could cross the country without your feet ever having to touch the ground.

I'd like to conclude with three poems. Poetry often reaches the parts that statistics fail to touch.

One of the very first poems in the English language was by the 7th Century Northumbrian monk called Caedmon. He captured the vision of a country that was so covered by trees that the vast canopy resembled Heaven itself.

“Praise we the Fashioner now of Heaven's fabric,
The majesty of his might and his mind's wisdom,
Work of the World-warden, worker of all wonders,
How he the Lord of Glory everlasting,
Wrought first for the race of men Heaven as a rooftree,
Then made he Middle Earth to be their mansion.”

Of course, as we know only too well that over the centuries the forests were decimated unsustainably and depleted for all sorts of social, industrial, political and military reasons.

Over a thousand years later the priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins bemoaned the felling of the Binsey Poplars to make sleepers for the Great Western Railway.

“O if we but knew what we do

When we delve or hew –

Hack and rack the growing green!”

He moaned and added,

“To mend her we end her,

When we hew or delve:

After-comers cannot guess the beauty been,

Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve

Strokes of havoc unselfe

The sweet especial scene,

Rural scene, a rural scene,

Sweet especial rural scene.”

That was, of course, unsustainable deforestation

Hopkins laments the lost aesthetic beauty of trees. They are nature’s cathedrals. And as well as providing a living for the entrepreneur they are also a hospital for the stressed which is what the poet and depressive John Clare found and expressed so simply in his poem the Hollow Tree:

“How oft a summer shower hath started me
To seek for shelter in a hollow tree
Old huge ash-dotterel wasted to a shell
Whose vigorous head still grew and flourished well
Where ten might sit upon a battered floor
And still look round discovering room for more
And he who chose a hermit life to share
Might have a door and make a cabin there
They seemed so like a house that our desires
Would call them so and make our gypsy fires
And eat field dinners of the juicy peas
Till we were wet and drabbled to the knees
But in our old tree-house rain as it might
Not one drop fell although it rained all night.”

And since you've asked a bishop to address you I hope you'll forgive me if I draw to a close with a reference to the Bible. In its very last pages it holds before us a vision of a new world, one in which the tree of life features prominently. The writer pens this prophetic verse,

“The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” I'm tempted to say, 'Amen'!

As an honorary forester I thank you, the real foresters, for your vision, expertise, skills and commitment. It is not an exaggeration to say that your Industry and Institute are vital to the future of the Planet.

