5. Contradictions in the forests: Economics versus conservation

By the early 1960s the Forestry Commission was in search for a new justification to underpin forestry policy. The problem was that the Zuckerman Report and the working party set up in its wake recommended a two strand forestry policy that was on the one hand based on amenity and social objectives and on the other economics. During the 1960s the Commission struggled to come to terms with these two seemingly contradictory directions in forest policy and this chapter will chart the evolution of this struggle, which ended in favour of hard economics. This outcome laid the foundation for the troubles with environmentalists and momentous changes in forest policy and practice during the last two decades of the 20th century.

The 1963 forest policy review

In July 1962 another working party, also known as the Dew Committee, was appointed to review the progress made since the working party of 1958. The report was finished by the summer of 1963 and confirmed and reinforced the findings of the 1958 government statement. The profitability of forestry came once more under scrutiny and the working party believed that the likely return on investment in new planting might be better than was previously thought. It estimated that the rate of return could rise to 4.5 or 5 per cent, but that was still half the rate the Treasury preferred at that time. In the years between the Zuckerman report and the first five year forestry review, the Treasury had put up its borrowing rate considerably and the minimum return on any new investment was now between 8 and 10 per cent. The working party realised there was a problem and tried to find a way out to secure the financial future of the Forestry Commission by continuing to justify any planting programme with social considerations. The 1962 working party put even more emphasis on the social aspects than its 1958 predecessor had, however, it was not enough because it was observed that ‘planting may, by itself, be adequate to stop or at least retard the depopulation of an area... [but] the full benefit will result only when wood becomes to be extracted and used in enterprises ranging from small rural industries to large pulp mills ...’.  

2 Ibid., p. 4.
The working party also observed the increasing importance of forests for recreation and leisure activities: ‘recreational value of the forests is increasing every year’. Hard figures backed this up and between 1951 and 1963 the number of campers on Forestry Commission sites increased five fold to 250,000.3 Although the Forestry Act did not give the Forestry Commission specific powers to spend money on access or recreation, the Commission applied a broad interpretation of the 1919 Act to provide recreational facilities such as footpath and car parks. By the early 1960s the Forestry Commission declared a policy of so-called ‘open forests’, which was a deliberate attempt to attract the public. The working party supported this development and was of the opinion that the ‘commission should now broaden its approach’. Options under consideration included providing scenic routes and harmonising buildings, bridges and forests with the landscape. This last aspect was by no means new, as it had been attempted since the 1930s in the Forest Parks. It was thought that providing recreational facilities ‘would cost little money and would not require special legislation’.4

With respect to landscape preservation and nature conservation, the working party thought that the extent of the future planting programme should not be influenced by this factor. On the other hand, the working party welcomed the proposed employment of a landscape consultant by the Forestry Commission, and advised:

Ministers should direct the Commission to take public access for recreation and the appearance of the landscape positively into account when they draw up their programme for the planting and acquisition of land.5

It was not thought necessary to formalise this objective in a new Forestry Act because there was ‘… now sufficient awareness of the importance of preserving the landscape to make any special legislation unnecessary’.6

The Minister of Agriculture presented the working party’s findings to the House of Commons in July 1963, exactly five years after the Government’s statement following the Zuckerman Report. The most important feature of the new statement was that the Commission’s planting programme was determined for a period of ten years between 1964 and 1973. Unlike the programme outlined in the statement of 1958, the planting programme was not meant to fall off towards the end of the period but instead to increase. Most of this planting was to take place in the uplands of Scotland and the Government once more confirmed the

3 Ibid., p. 10.
4 Ibid., p. 9.
6 Ibid.
importance of forestry for the rural economy and communities in the upland areas of Scotland and Wales. Secondly, the government and the Forestry Commission were confident that private forestry, with the aid of grants administered by the Commission, would increasingly play a large part in forestry.

Thirdly, the Commission was encouraged to pay more attention to the beauty that well planned forestry could bring to the landscape, and to continue its policy of providing access and recreational facilities. Finally the Government recognised the benefits that increased home production of wood could bring to the national economy. Mounting supply of raw materials from forests necessitated expansion in timber processing, which deserved the support of the Government through the agency of the Forestry Commission.7

By 1964 the future of the Forestry Commission depended upon three factors: firstly, the success of reinforcing the rural economy in upland Scotland and Wales; secondly, success in the production and supply of raw materials for an emerging domestic wood processing industry; and, finally, provision of recreational facilities and landscape preservation.

Search for a new purpose

By the close of the 1950s the Forestry Commission found itself in a reflective mood and in its 1959 Annual Report the Commission was redefining forestry policy objectives. The removal of the strategic underpinning of British forestry policy created a lot of uncertainty among foresters. Questions about the aim of British forestry had become paramount. For decades foresters were accustomed to the practice of planting trees, growing them and leaving the crop as long as possible in the forests as a timber reserve. They did not bother much with the needs of the market, economics or marketing. By the 1960s foresters were forced to take these things into consideration; it was felt that the former policy was not very economical and locked up an excess of capital in the woods.8

In 1958, Sir Henry Beresford-Peirse, deputy director general of the Forestry Commission, defended this state of affairs during a meeting of foresters at the Forestry Training Centre at Dartington, in Devon. Beresford-Peirse questioned:

> Whether one could say we were growing conifers badly in the absence of certain knowledge of what we were growing conifers for. In a period of building up stocks, economics tended to be pushed in the background.9

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However, as we have seen above, the findings of the two working parties had put economics centre stage together with social, recreational and conservation concerns. The development of a wood-processing industry would meet both the social and economic objectives of the post-1958 forest policy by providing an outlet for forest products and it also encouraged the planting of more trees to secure future supply. The Forestry Commission rationalised its operations by increasingly applying short rotation forestry and mechanisation. In this way, forests were turned into ‘wood factories’.

This mood was reflected at a symposium on natural resources held at the Royal Society of Edinburgh in October 1960, where James Macdonald, deputy director general of the Forestry Commission, recognised the need for a domestic wood processing industry to absorb forest products. The Government understood that the Forestry Commission needed an outlet for its products to ensure forestry would be profitable. Although the Government was convinced of the value of forestry for the rural economy in Britain, the Treasury was clearly sceptical about the proposed forestry programme. As discussed above, the return of forestry was about half the rate of return prescribed by the Treasury for investment of public money. That was why the Forestry Commission wrote a memorandum to the Treasury arguing that forestry could make a profit if two conditions were met: firstly, if better soils could be planted to produce quicker and better timber; and, secondly, if a significant domestic wood processing industry were to develop to buy the timber. Growing timber faster would mean that interest paid on the investment would be lower and, as a result, forestry would become more profitable. The problem was that the best land was needed for agriculture and remained unavailable to forestry. As a result the creation of densely packed plantations of fast growing conifers on heath and moorland had to be expanded even further. But the Commission was aware that if this did not work another justification would be needed. To counter any future criticism the memorandum included a statement emphasising the non-economic benefits:

> It should be recognised … that the returns to capital vary widely from one form of public investment to another, and that there is no one rate of interest that can be regarded as the minimum acceptable return from all forms of public expenditure in view of the diversity of non-monetary benefits.\(^{10}\)

The memorandum was written in 1963, a year after the Government decided to subsidise construction of a large paper and pulp mill at Fort William in Scotland.\(^{11}\) This bizarre example of economic engineering was clearly aimed at maintaining

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10 TNA: PRO T224/618 Factors influencing investment in forestry, Memorandum of the Planning & Economics Branch of the FC to the Treasury, September 1964.

forestry's image as a financially viable industry, but it is surprising that the Treasury did not see through this ploy. The most important problem facing any pulp mill is that of access and transport and the locations of the plantations were spread across mountainous country. It was found that transporting wood from Sweden to Fort William was cheaper than sourcing it directly from the Highlands on the mill's doorstep. An additional problem applying to most pulp mills is that continual increase in production capacity is needed for them to be economic. This became apparent in the early 1980s when the Fort William Paper Mill closed, after profitable subsidised contracts ended and realistic high price contracts had to be negotiated. On top of that no help was forthcoming from the government to modernise the mill's equipment or to increase capacity.

Notwithstanding these potential problems, subsidised construction of the Fort William pulp mill and the creation of mills in other parts of the United Kingdom went ahead during the 1960s. The emergence of a subsidised domestic forest products processing industry reinforced the need for large-scale single-species plantations, since manufacturers did not like to vary their chemical formulae, and they needed a cast-iron guarantee of supply. This required a highly rationalised and mechanised forestry practice that would make it possible to grow large quantities of timber in short rotations.

This type of forestry was made possible with the development of mechanical site preparation and aerial application of fertiliser, allowing afforestation on the poorest sites. In 1961, Ryle noted in an article in *Scottish Forestry* that ‘mass production in the factory needs to be fed by raw materials mass produced in the forests’. The silvicultural system that was thought to answer the needs of the market was that of short rotations and an even-aged, one-species crop. This silvicultural system was regarded as the easiest to manage, to harvest and to market, and therefore the most economic. Sites could now be adapted to the species, rather than species to the site. Ryle concluded that

there must be a very sound reason for any divergence from the silvicultural system which will be the cheapest to manage: the selection forest or the forest changing in age or constitution by tiny cellules, though delightful aesthetically and of unending interest to the silviculturist, must be discounted ... as a commercial investment.

These developments gave rise to a new type of plantation, with a particularly hard-edged commercial aim to produce cheap timber in the fastest possible way.

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12 Walter Reid, ‘Transport of Timber Too Costly’, *Scottish Forestry* 22 (1968) 1, 60-63.
14 Mackay, *Scotlands Rural Land Use Agencies*, p. 35.
16 Ibid.
Conquering the Highlands

This new kind of forestry was at loggerheads with the newfound emphasis on landscape conservation and the provision of recreation. Despite this, a rudimentary environmental and recreation policy developed within the Forestry Commission during the 1960s.

Recreation and conservation

The 1959 Annual Report of the Forestry Commission made for some interesting reading, since for the first time a section was devoted to environmental issues. The Commission admitted that its planting policy had irretrievably ruined many square miles of unspoiled upland by imposing large blocks of commercially managed conifers on land where the semi-natural cover is heather, bracken, moorgrass and scrub. It is interesting to note the perception of this landscape by the Forestry Commission as natural, given that moorland and scrub were the result of a long history of sheep and cattle grazing. Surprisingly the Commission agreed that in some areas large-scale conifer plantations were not acceptable, although these were, according to the Commission, only exceptional areas. They tried to make single-species conifer plantations acceptable by stating that ‘intelligent managed conifer plantations ..., can be a positive enhancement to the scenery as soon as they have passed out of the thicket stage, when no plantation ... is beautiful’. Finally the Commission defended itself against accusations that it had a prejudice against hardwoods and replied that ‘where hardwoods will make a worthwhile crop the Commission will continue to plant them’. If conifers grow better then hardwoods, these should be used instead to make ‘best use of the land available to them’.

The Commission seemed to anticipate in which direction the tide of forestry was moving and that environmental issues and landscape utilisation were becoming more important. In doing so the Forestry Commission saw hardly any contradiction with its new emerging policy of forest expansion and efficient timber production on a large-scale to cater for the wood processing industry. It would create forests that could be used for recreation and other purposes, which was part of the emergence of the new management philosophy of multiple use forestry. Many of these developments drew upon the Forestry Commission’s experience with the National Forestry Parks and the conflicts over the impact of forestry on the landscape, for example in the Lake District. It might be considered a sign of the times that an entire paragraph in the forestry policy statement of the Minister of Agriculture in July 1963 was devoted to

18 Ibid.
recreation, and paying attention to the beauty of the landscape.\textsuperscript{19} For the first time, a government minister included themes of forest recreation and amenity in a policy statement.

The first theme, recreation was one of the discussion topics during a meeting of the Scottish Forest Parks Advisory Committee in December 1963. The chairman, Lord Waldegrave, referred at this meeting to the Ministerial forestry statement of July 1963 in which it had been stated that the Commission ‘will bear in mind the need, whenever possible, to provide public access and recreation …’.\textsuperscript{20} In pursuance of this policy the commissioners were prepared to spend a certain amount of money on the improvement of facilities in the existing Forest Parks, although the Treasury did not look favourable on this. It was also agreed that the creation of one or two new forest parks in Scotland in addition to those already in existence would be considered. To make these forests more attractive to the public the Commission was aware it had to make them less monotonous. It was for this purpose that in 1963 the Commission stated that it was ‘clearly directed to give more attention to the beauty that well planned forestry can bring to the countryside’.\textsuperscript{21}

To achieve this goal of integrating forestry with aesthetic considerations and the provision of recreational facilities the Commission appointed two landscape consultants. The first was Betty Moira, a landscape architect from Edinburgh, appointed to make a plan for the Glen More Forest Park in the Cairngorms. Her task was described as follows:

\begin{quotation}
\ldots to investigate and report in the best way to develop the facilities afforded to the public in [the Glen More] Forest Park so as to co-ordinate the demands of the various amenity and holiday bodies into an integrated plan.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quotation}

That same year Sylvia Crowe, a former president of the Institute of Landscape Architects, was appointed to assist the Commission in making its forests as attractive in appearance as possible without interfering with wood production. For the first time attention to the aesthetic and recreational functions of the forests were included as an active part of the Commission’s objectives. Crowe’s work will be reviewed in chapter seven.

These beginnings developed slowly but steadily during the 1960s. In 1964 it was noted that nature conservation in the countryside had been added to the policy objectives of attention to amenity and recreation. It is no coincidence

\begin{thebibliography}
\bibitem{19} Forestry Commission, \textit{Annual Report 1963}, pp. 6-7.
\bibitem{20} PRO F18/596 Glenmore: correspondence. Notes of meeting, 4 December 1963.
\bibitem{21} Ibid., p. 7.
\bibitem{22} TNA: PRO F18/596 Letter from R.I. Affleck to D.R. Collinson of the Treasury, considering the appointment of Mrs. Moira, 18 December 1964.
\end{thebibliography}
that during that same year the communal interest in land use of the Forestry Commission, the National Parks Commission and Nature Conservancy was given special recognition, with the establishment of quarterly meetings of their chairmen. This initiative was taken to ensure cohesion between the development of forestry, the preservation of amenity and the conservation of nature. These arrangements had their counterpart in Scotland, where the chairmen of the Scottish National Committee of the Forestry Commission, the Nature Conservancy and the National Trust for Scotland were engaged in quarterly meetings.\(^{21}\)

In 1965, two years after the official adoption of conservation elements as policy objectives, the Commissioners recognised that they were custodians of ‘magnificent scenery and great variety of wildlife’.\(^{24}\) The Commission also recognised the importance of timber production as well as conservation and recreation as important functions of its forests when it wrote in reaction to the Government’s 1965 white paper on leisure in the countryside:

> While the Commission’s primary function is to produce timber to help to meet the steadily increasing demands of industry, there is growing recognition both inside and outside the Commission of the part which the forests can and should play in improving the landscape and in improving opportunities for open-air recreation… .\(^{25}\)

Landscape conservation and recreation were regarded as closely linked and almost treated as the same problem. This was made possible with the emergence of the concept of the multi-purpose use of forests, which was introduced from the United States in the 1950s. In this concept the forests are managed for production of timber, the protection of water and other resources, to preserve landscape beauty and attractiveness for recreational purposes, and to maintain a favourable habitat for wildlife. All these resources had to be co-ordinated under a ‘multiple use’ plan aimed at managing and sustaining the production of a variety of services as wide ranging as commercial timber production and recreation.\(^{26}\) The concept of multiple land use fitted perfectly with the Commission’s aim of producing timber for a growing wood processing industry and increased demand for recreation and nature conservation. The Commission regarded the integration of forestry, recreation, visual amenity and nature conservation as ‘a practical demonstration of multiple land use’.\(^{27}\)

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25 Ibid., p. 9.
26 TNA: PRO F18/617 Memorandum of evidence by the Nature Conservancy, pp. 3-4.
Figure 5.1: Number of camper nights on Forestry Commission campsites, 1950–1975.

Source: Forestry Commission Annual Reports.

By 1970, pressures on the Forestry Commission to protect landscapes of outstanding beauty and to provide and recreational facilities were mounting because public demand for countryside recreation was increasing rapidly (Figure 5.1). As the largest landowner in Scotland, the Forestry Commission realised it was in a unique position to meet that demand, since its forests were situated in some of the most scenic parts of the country. The size and the wide distribution of these estates also meant it had a considerable capacity for absorbing visitors without putting too much pressure on the environment.

In response to increasing recreational use of its forests, the Commission established a recreation and conservation branch in 1969. A year later the chairman of the Forestry Commission, Lord Taylor of Gryfe, called a press conference to explain its newly formulated recreation policy. During this press conference Lord Taylor pointed out that it was the Commission's aim ‘to develop the unique features and potential of its forests [for recreational purposes]’. He further explained that the Commission was to allow the public to enter all its forests on foot without charge and that plans were in the making for the expansion of car parks, campsites and other facilities. Finally the Chairman explained that special attention would be given to the use of the forests for educational purposes and the study of natural history. Because conservation

and recreation were so closely linked, emphasis was put on the protection and preservation of the forest environment and its wildlife. These were some of the most important attractions for visitors, which meant the Commission could not afford to neglect them.

**Cost-benefit review of 1972**

By the start of the 1970s everything seemed to be progressing smoothly and forestry had found its new aims: producing commercial timber for a growing domestic wood industry, playing its part in sustaining the rural economy, providing recreational facilities and the protection of the beauty of the landscape. However, this sense of optimism was soon put under pressure thanks to another major review of forestry policy in 1972. For the first time an attempt was made to evaluate a range of environmental and economic impacts, such as those on recreation, labour provision and import saving. The review attempted to estimate forestry’s cost to the nation, of devoting land and labour to forestry.\(^{29}\) The assessment’s conclusion was that when viewed purely as a financial investment forestry offered low yields, with a return of about three per cent on capital. For this reason, it was concluded that the case for new planting, whether by the Forestry Commission or with financial aid from the private sector, rested mainly on social benefits, notably improved employment and landscape and recreational use.

Publicly, the Forestry Commissioners welcomed the review and felt it was supportive but the reality proved quite different. In the Commission’s *Annual Report* of 1972 they concluded that the ‘main justification for Forestry Commission planting is to be found in the part which it can play in sustaining the rural economy’.\(^{30}\) The report continued with the happy message that the Forestry Commission was encouraged to further increase forest acreage and that there should be a ‘marked increase on emphasis both on visual amenity and on realising their potential for recreation’.\(^{31}\) The commissioners deliberately left out mention that the government’s cost benefit analysis had concluded that the creation of state forests was simply uneconomic. The review’s overall conclusion was that forestry fell far short of achieving the government’s ten per cent target rate for return on investment. With regard to the role of forestry in sustaining the rural economy it became clear that the cost of providing jobs in state forestry was very high and that if cheaper means of job creation could be found, it


\(^{31}\) Ibid.
would surely move resources away from forestry.\textsuperscript{32} It seemed that forestry was facing hard financial times but luckily for the Commission the forestry policy review also provided an answer, by putting emphasis on the value of recreation and amenity. This resulted in a remarkable greening of state forestry policy. In its \textit{1971–72 Annual Report} the Commission showed an acute insight into the nature of its own plantations:

From the beginning the Commission was automatically oriented towards conifers; and the uplands of Scotland, England and Wales provided the widest and most natural scope for them on a large scale.\textsuperscript{33}

This policy was initially designed to create a strategic timber reserve as quickly as possible, but by the 1960s this was no longer necessary and the Commission put increasing emphasis on the need for the best economic return from taxpayers’ money. Broadleaves were attractive trees but were growing too slowly to be of any economic value to the newly emerging wood processing industry. Now that the government had removed the basis for the existence of even conifer plantations the question of what was left for the Forestry Commission to prioritise became paramount. The answer to this question was broadleaves. The Commission realised that even without a clear economic or employment function, its forests were still attractive to the rising number of urban dwellers visiting the forests. However, criticism could no longer be countered by the argument that young commercial plantations were not particularly attractive but were necessary for efficient wood production and the provision of employment in upland areas. The task of making forest plantations more attractive became paramount and for this reason the Commission began to put more emphasis on landscape values than ever before:

More recently the Commissioners have, however, recognised that greater emphasis should be given to maintaining the woodland character of the countryside particularly in the south of England. They have recognised that to this end in certain of their woodlands the maintenance of hardwoods, where silviculturally this is possible, is an essential part of the landscape. The objective of the Commissioners is to perpetuate by active management the living character of the woodland landscape for future generations to enjoy.\textsuperscript{34}

In 1972 the Forestry Commission ‘discovered’ broadleaves and in doing so it showed itself to be remarkable enlightened and ahead of its time. However, this development must not be overrated because from this statement it is clear that the new broadleaf policy mainly applied to the English countryside. North

\textsuperscript{32} Price, ‘Twenty-five Years of Forestry Cost-benefit Analysis in Britain’, p. 172.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 11.
of the border, the new policy aim was hardly noticeable and the planting of conifers continued, especially in the far north of Scotland. It continued because these regions, especially Caithness and Sutherland, were not regarded as important tourist destinations. A second and probably more important reason is that the Forestry Commission had invested in infrastructure to cultivate these areas for forestry and did not want to lose the money it had invested. Official statistics of the Forestry Commission showed no slowing down of the planting rate of conifers during the first half of the 1970s and the number of hectares of broadleaf trees planted was far from impressive. For example, between 1969 and 1975 only 120 hectares were planted with broadleaf trees while 91,120 hectares of conifers were planted during the same period (table 5.1).

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<tr>
<td>Conifers</td>
<td>15,566</td>
<td>19,763</td>
<td>19,630</td>
<td>17,739</td>
<td>18,422</td>
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<tr>
<td>Broadleaf</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15,585</td>
<td>19,751</td>
<td>19,642</td>
<td>17,764</td>
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Source: Forestry Commission Annual Reports.

The Forestry Commission paid lip service to broadleaves and environmental issues in general, but little value was assigned to the concept in practice. In the early 1970s the Commission stated that it was planting substantial areas with larch and other conifers ‘in order to bring a variety of shades of green’ to the forests. What was not specified in the 1971 Annual Report or in reports of the following years was the area of ‘other conifers’ planted and their geographical distribution. We can only speculate as to why the Commission ceased to publish such details, but it was probably because the proportion of Sitka spruce was embarrassingly high in comparison with other species, especially broadleaves. Although the Countryside Acts of 1967 and 1968 had conferred new powers on the Forestry Commission with regard to recreation and conservation, no new resources were assigned to implement them.

A glance at the expenditure on and income from recreational facilities explains why the Forestry Commission was more interested in conifer plantations that could possibly make a profit in the long run than plunging wholeheartedly into a policy with an emphasis on recreation and conservation. Between 1967 and 1973, money spent on recreational facilities rose by more than five times from about £200,000 to over £1,300,000, while recreational income increased only to about £400,000 (figure 5.2). Providing recreational facilities did not pay for itself and certainly not for a conservation and amenity programme. There was a recreation and open woods policy because taxpayers were granted access to the forests they had paid for. This harsh reality created a policy of double standards. On the one hand the Forestry Commission adopted, under public pressure, a new management policy for the New Forest in Hampshire, in which a priority was given to conservation of ‘the ancient and ornamental woodlands […] without regard to timber production objectives’. On the other hand, planting of conifers was going strongly ahead on the ‘bare grounds’ of the Scottish uplands without much consideration for visible impacts. In 1977 this attitude of double standards was confirmed in the Wood Production Outlook which claimed that recreation was not an important issue, since areas of forest expansion lay far from population centres.\footnote{\textit{The Wood Production Outlook in Britain. A Review} (Edinburgh: Forestry Commission, 1977), p. 63.}

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 9.}
Although the emphasis of forest policy had changed, production and supply of timber remained a major objective of management in state and private forests in Scotland. In most cases it was still believed that this would combine well with social objectives, but there was awareness that conflicts could arise and that forests designed and managed for timber production, were not always well suited to recreation. In the view of George Holmes, director general of the Commission from 1976 to 1987, wood production required simplicity and uniformity while the needs of amenity and recreation were best met by a diversity of landscape, environmental and forestry conditions. This gave rise to a schizophrenic forest policy and practice in which forest expansion led to the rise of commercial monoculture plantations, or forests of production, alongside forests of leisure and sites of conservation, which can be described as forests of consumption. The development of this two strand forestry policy did not originate entirely with the policy reviews in the years between 1957 and the 1970s but started during the inter-war period when the Forestry Commission encountered its first serious popular opposition to planting policies. This will be explored in the next chapter. These developments would eventually feed into post-war forestry reviews and the creation of the two strand forestry policy, which put conservationists and foresters on a collision course in the last two decades of the 20th century.