Bringing Town and Country Closer Together: Community forests in North East England

The Community Forest programme in England, announced in 1988, started as an experimental initiative by the Countryside Agency and the Forestry Commission, with an ambitious vision for the creation of well-wooded landscapes in and around major urban areas to be used for work, wildlife, recreation and education.

COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN ENGLAND
The term “community forestry” is applied in a number of different contexts around the world, although its definition and characteristics remain quite similar. The International Institute for Sustainable Development (Winnipeg, Canada) describes it as “including local people in planning and implementing forestry activities”, whereas the South African government sees it as a way of “addressing the national problem of social deprivation, impoverishment, deforestation and land degradation”. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, community forestry entails the “control, management and use of forest and tree resources by local communities; respect for social, economic and cultural relationships between people and forests; and a decentralised and participatory approach to forest management” (1).

Developed, as well as developing, countries can benefit from community forestry, in urban and periurban areas as well as rural regions. For example, the presence of substantial amounts of brown-field, underused and derelict land is one of the common features of all 12 Community Forests in England. Working with land agents, landowners and landfill agencies, Community Forest partnership organisations are helping to regenerate and restore undervalued areas into wildlife-rich, multipurpose woodlands and green spaces in a periurban setting.

In England, the Community Forests cover large areas around the edges of towns and cities - but unlike the great forests of old, which used to cover extensive parts of northern Europe, they are not continuous plantings of trees. Instead, these Community Forests comprise a rich mosaic of wooded landscapes and land uses including farmland, villages, leisure enterprises, nature areas and public open spaces. They are intended to create areas rich in wildlife, whilst making provisions for access, leisure and education - providing attractive areas in which to live, conduct business and enjoy leisure time.

Woodlands provide a good environment for recreation and can absorb relatively large numbers of visitors without loss of visual amenity or damage to habitats. Promoting recreation in the Community Forests includes maximising access to new and existing areas of woodland, creating new and interesting routes for walking, cycling and riding, and providing opportunities for leisure.
activities ranging from small picnic areas to woodland parks. Further opportunities for developing amenity exist through the creation and maintenance of small woodlands in more densely populated urban areas. Greenways (car-free roadways, often tree-lined) may be established to link points of interest, by connecting them to existing networks of cycle paths and footpaths.

NORTH EAST COMMUNITY FORESTS
Extending roughly 80 km to the north, south and west of the city of Newcastle, the North East of England is the smallest English region, with about 4% of the UK’s population, land area and economic output. Formerly dominated by energy production, heavy industry and manufacturing, the region has seen enormous change over the past 30 years, and is still dealing with the economic, social and structural consequences of its past - including a legacy of derelict and unused urban and periurban land. Average incomes are lower than in most of the rest of the UK, and some of the most socially deprived living conditions are found in the North East - although there are wide variations in standards of living across the region. The extensive rural areas of the region were traditionally dependent on farming, forestry and mineral extraction, but tourism has grown in importance, building on the region’s strong cultural identity and outstanding natural landscapes.

The North East has two designated Community Forests – The Tees Forest (set in the valley of the River Tees) and the Great North Forest (covering the lower Tyne and Wear river valleys and north County Durham). Established in 1991 and 1990, respectively, they are highly regarded as successful partnership organisations, involving a total of 11 out of the region’s 25 local government authorities, as well as the national Countryside Agency and Forestry Commission. The Great North Forest (http://www.greatnorthforest.co.uk/) covers an area of 249 square kilometres, while The Tees Forest (http://www.teesforest.org.uk/) encompasses some 350 square kilometres. These recognised “brand” names have now been brought together under one heading as North East Community Forests.

ACHIEVEMENTS
Over the last 13 years, the two Community Forest organisations in North East England have undertaken a wide range of activities in urban and periurban areas, helping to create a more attractive and well-wooded environment with accessible and sustainable managed landscapes that enhance the health, well being and quality of life of the local people. High-quality, well-wooded functional environments have been created in the rural-urban fringe, delivering a better quality of life for the people of the region. The environmental projects translate regional and national policy strategies into practical action.

In England a process of devolution and decentralisation of decision making to the regions is underway. Already a significant amount of planning and decision making is taking place within the North East region, and the North East Community Forests are contributing to this process of governance through action, research and participation in the development of new regional strategies such as the 2004 North East Regional Forest Strategy. The emphasis on decentralised government planning, in the form of Regional Spatial Strategies as well as Local Development Frameworks and Community Strategies, in conjunction with the long-term Community Forest plans, will help to unlock the potential of those periurban areas termed the rural-urban fringe.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING
Implementation of community forestry requires public involvement. North East Community Forests are increasing the involvement and inclusion of communities and individuals, and empowering communities to become strong advocates for community forestry and local environmental action. The long-term objective is to create a substantial caucus of support within the community, which will in turn influence politicians and decision makers to take...
positive steps that aid Community Forest implementation.

By promoting and delivering programmes that foster local environmental action, the Community Forests partnership is seeking to create “community forests for all”. This has the added benefit of raising awareness of our activities in areas of society that are not normally affected by the issue of ‘forestry’, such as planning policy, health services, regeneration, transportation and economic development. Tools to involve the community include theatre productions, festivals and events, public transport initiatives, labour market training schemes and conservation volunteering and training.

The periurban environment provides opportunities for hands-on learning in a variety of outdoor settings. The educational sector of the programme supports all parts of the UK national school curriculum, with an emphasis on environmental education and rural studies. Further learning opportunities include vocational training for older students as well as “lifelong learning” for adults, especially in the practical skills needed to maintain the environmental and recreational fabric of these periurban areas. A key dimension in the approach is therefore to employ community engagement and education specialists within the Community Forest teams.

FINANCING AND VALUE ADDED

Financial support for the Community Forests in England comes from a range of sources. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Forestry Commission and the Countryside Agency fund forest planting, management, restoration of derelict land and provision of leisure facilities. Additional support comes from partnerships with local governments and industry, as well as the voluntary sector. A major reason why Community Forest partnerships were established was to “add value” to the individual work of local stakeholders including local government authorities. Evaluations of the North East Community Forests programme in the past year have shown high value-added outcomes.

A NEW PHASE OF SUPPORT AND ACTIVITY

The timeframe 2004 – 2009 will be a period of new challenges as the Community Forest organisations mainstream their work into new regional structures. The context for this process is nevertheless encouraging, including increasing regionalisation, a growing culture of partnerships, and recognition of the role forests, woods and trees play in sustaining the quality of life in the region.

The Community Forest organisations in North East England have now established themselves as “North East Community Forests Limited”. This a new not-for-profit company, owned and operated by public sector partners, with a tightly defined role as: a strategic partner for the region’s existing Community Forests and their local authority partners; a new delivery partner for the Forestry Commission and Regional Forest Strategy; and an innovative project partner for the regional development agency ONE NorthEast, the Countryside Agency, its successors, and other regional agencies.

North East Community Forests Limited (NECF) aims to achieve its wider goals by accessing investment funds, piloting new initiatives and facilitating land ownership for projects that deliver wide-ranging environmental, social and economic benefits. Some of these new products and services may also be applicable in other national contexts, including both developed and developing countries, to help bring rural and urban areas closer together wherever community forestry is practised.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Community Forests in our country and our region are contributing to the broader modern aims of “liveability” and “sustainable communities”. These are terms which attempt to describe the improved quality of life sought by the citizens of many countries that are caught up in a process of rapid social and demographic change, with the ebb and flow of migration from rural to urban areas and back again. The success of urban and periurban “liveability” policies will be measured by whether they help to produce not only nicer neighbourhoods, but happier inhabitants as well.

NOTE

1) References are taken from the following sites (Web pages accessed August 2004):
http://www.dwaf.gov.za/Forestry/default.asp
South Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, Pretoria, South
http://www.iisd.org/didigest/glossary.htm:
International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg, Canada
http://www.countryside.gov.uk/Publications/articles/index.asp:
Evaluation of the Community Forest Programme, Countryside Agency, Cheltenham, UK