

Abstract of Ph.D thesis entitled:
An Environmental History of State Forestry in Scotland,
1919 – 1970

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The present single species geometric forest plantations in the Scottish landscape suggest that foresters were not interested in conservation issues and landscape aesthetics. This thesis argues that the appearance of the forests is not so much the result of the foresters' lack of interest in conservation and nature but the social, economic and political pressures that underpinned their creation as well as the Scottish physical environment. Scottish foresters have had a long-standing interest in conservation issues that dates back to the colonial roots of Scottish forestry in mid-19th century India. The concept of conservation was introduced in Scotland through foresters returning from their service in India and other parts of the Empire. The root of the interest in landscape aesthetics dates back even to the 18th century when Scottish landowners started to plant trees, both exotic and native, to beautify their estates.

By the second half of the 19th century influential landowners became concerned about the fact that Scotland could not produce sufficient timber to provide for its own needs. They also thought that forestry could provide jobs in the Highlands of Scotland and thus contribute to strengthening the social and economic fabric of rural Scotland. To increase timber production and improve the rural economy, influential landowners lobbied for the creation of a forestry agency. It was from these roots - aesthetics, conservation and social and economic concerns - that forestry policy in Scotland developed.

It was only after the First World War, when Britain was confronted with severe timber shortages, that a state forestry organisation, the Forestry Commission, was created. Its initial task was to create a strategic timber reserve but over time conservation objectives came on board forest policy. The lands available for forestry were poor upland areas where only a handful introduced conifers were able to survive the harsh condition and, because of their fast growth, created in a relatively short time-span the desired timber reserve. It was for this reason that the forests created by the Forestry Commission were mainly made up of fast

growing conifers introduced from the Pacific coast of North America. Technical improvements such as the introduction of mechanical ploughing and the use of fertilisers expanded the range of planting and pushed planting even further uphill. The coincidence of ploughing and the use of conifers on a large scale also led to an increasing monotonous appearance of the new plantations. It was this monotonous and artificial appearance that attracted the first opposition to the planting of conifers in the Lake District, but not in the Scottish Highlands.

The development of an environmental policy as part of state forestry in Scotland was not so much driven by external pressures from conservation organisations but by a combination of economic and social pressures in the Highlands and the fact that many foresters are sensitive to the environment in which they work. The general public and nature conservation organisations were until the 1970s not much concerned about the emergence of coniferous plantations in the landscape. Other more pressing environmental issues, such as the impact of build structures on the landscape, the use of herbicides, and the creation of nature reserves, occupied public environmental concern and nature conservation organisations alike. In the meantime the Commission developed the fundamentals on which the broadleaf and conservation policies of the 1990s became based. It was the pressure from the Treasury and the wood processing industry that made it hard to change direction because hard economics were dominant. But when change came, the Commission was able to adapt to the new situation thanks to the deep-rooted interest of its staff in nature conservation.