

Response to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee Inquiry into Forest Research

The British Ecological Society

“advancing ecology and making it count”

June 2011

Introduction

The British Ecological Society (BES) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into funding and priorities for forest research. The BES is the oldest learned ecological society in the world, due to celebrate its centenary in 2013. Our members, who number close to 4,000, are drawn from the full spectrum of ecological research, including forestry. For further information about the Society’s work, visit our website, at www.britishecologicalsociety.org

Summary

- Forests and woodlands are important providers of a range of ecosystem services, and are increasingly under pressure from environmental and climatic change.
- The sector has been chronically under funded, and is becoming increasingly reliant on self-funded research and philanthropic donations.
- The scope of forest research is currently too narrow. Without a more joined up approach forest research will not be able to help deliver the ecosystem based priorities outlined in the recent Defra Natural Environment White Paper. More collaboration between different organisations is needed on a national and international level.
- Many members feel that the funding allocation process is currently unfair, and needs to be replaced with a more open and transparent system.
- Forest research in the UK is poorly funded compared to other countries. This is discouraging young researchers from entering the profession and reducing the capacity of British universities to deliver high quality research.

Specific Comments

a) What has been the effect of the Spending Review on forest research?

1. The recent National Ecosystem Assessment outlines the importance of forests and woodlands in providing a number of ecosystem services including recreation, timber production and biodiversity conservation. However forests and woodlands are under increasing pressure from environmental change and demand for natural resources. It is important to ensure that the UK has a strong forest research sector to find the best ways to adapt to and protect against these pressures.
2. It has been reported that there will be cuts of around 25% to the Forestry Commission research budget¹; and this will undoubtedly have a negative impact on the sector.

¹ Forestry Commission 2011 Forestry Commission services and the Westminster Government Spending Review (press release). March 2011. Available at < <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-8F8CL4>> (accessed 8th June 2011)

3. The agency Forest Research will most likely experience the biggest impact, because of their high overhead costs and reliance on funding allocated by the Forestry Commission. Research commissioned by NERC, CEH, Natural England and Scottish Natural Heritage is also likely to be heavily impacted. Universities and private and third-sector research are likely to experience knock on effects, which may lead to an increased reliance on self-funded study and research, and philanthropic donations. This will reduce the number of young researchers involved in forest research, as only established and experienced researchers can attract funding from private sources.
4. Many of our members emphasised that greater forest research is needed at a time when forestry is facing many novel challenges including climate change, new pests and diseases, and increasing pressure to provide multiple benefits such as biodiversity conservation and recreation.
5. Forest research has a long history of being under-funded, particularly long term studies which are so vital to the sector. Public sector funding for forest research, although limited, remains vital in the sector. With the increased pressures the sector is facing it would be advisable to review the way existing forest research funding is allocated, in order to achieve higher levels of research and better value for money.

b) How are priorities in forest research set and resources allocated?

6. Nearly all of the current forest research priorities are based on Forestry Commission policy (e.g. climate change). The scope of research commissioned by the Forestry Commission and other agencies is narrow and many feel that the sector has been slow in embracing the wider policy agenda, including the importance of ecosystem services and natural capital. Trees and forests have an important role in a variety of landscapes. Some members feel that there has been a lack of research into the value of these trees, their role in promoting climate and environmental change resilience and how they are best protected. Better collaboration is needed between forest and agricultural research, to find new methods and incentives to protect trees and woodlands in the agricultural landscape. Current research priorities neglect non-production forests, which have great potential to deliver biodiversity and recreation benefits, the importance of which were outlined in the National Ecosystem Assessment and Natural Environment White Paper.
7. Many feel that although there are mechanisms for consulting the university, private and third sectors on Government research priorities for forestry, these views are not sufficiently considered in decision-making. This consultation process needs become formalised, with private and third sector interests visible in the final allocation of public-sector research funds.
8. Around 90% of the Forestry Commission's research spending is allocated to the agency Forest Research. Many organisations and academics outside of Forest Research have found they are only invited to submit proposals when Forest Research is unable to carry out a particular project. A more open funding allocation system, where other organisations are able to bid for research funding (such as the system used by Defra) should be encouraged, to achieve value for money and encourage better research and innovation.
9. Forest Research could deliver better value for money whilst maintaining the same research output by collaborating with other research providers. Obstacles to collaboration (such as excessive health and safety provisions) need to be examined. If Defra and the Forestry Commission were to work together to set common research priorities then more policy relevant research could be delivered more economically. Integrated studies could be carried out, assessing the roles of different components of ecosystems in the delivery of services. Forest research is vital for policy at all levels and Defra and DFID should work more closely with other European and international bodies to address pressing issues.

c) How does the UK's capability in forest research compare with other countries?

10. The proportion of research funding allocated to forest research in the UK is low compared to the USA, Australia, Switzerland, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands, and the security of funding is much more uncertain in the UK in comparison with other countries². Consequently the capacity of British universities to deliver high quality forest research is declining.
11. Other countries have a much higher level of privately funded research, something that the UK lacks. There are several good example of low cost research led by business and third sector organisations (e.g. the British and Irish Hardwoods Trust's Hardwood Improvement Programme³), and this should continue to be supported, reducing the UK's reliance on public sector funding.
12. In the UK poor funding in forestry has led to low morale among forest research workers, and dissuades young researchers from specialising in forestry. In other countries a much higher level of funding is available to young researchers and many students from abroad are funded by their home countries to study forestry in the UK. Some members have noted that in some institutions up to 75% of forestry PhD students in Britain are non-UK nationals, highlighting the disparity in funding available to young researchers in the UK compared to other countries. Many young British researchers who do decide to specialise in forestry leave the UK to work in European and American institutions, where funding is much more stable.
13. Better international collaboration could help deliver forest research objectives in climate change, biosecurity and tree improvement, reducing the level of public-funding that needs to be allocated to these areas.

d) Are there threats to forest research in the UK?

14. Current low levels of funding and the uncertainty surrounding future funding are serious threats to forest research in the UK.
15. Forestry studies are often long-term, and are particularly vulnerable to uncertainties in future funding. One of the only remaining permanent long term forestry studies in the UK is funded by Natural England. In the future long-term studies may only be possible through philanthropic support. Collaboration with other disciplines and international research groups may be one way to enable continuation of long term studies.
16. Many forestry researchers are approaching the end of their careers and retiring academics are not being replaced. Very few young researchers are pursuing a career in forestry, which presents serious implications for the future and skills base of the sector. University courses in forestry are hard to find, MSc and PhD funding is scarce and there are few opportunities for PhD students to be recruited into junior scientist posts following completion of their studies. Consequently many young researchers are forced to self-fund their studies and accept lengthy voluntary work placements before finding paid work. Social inclusion for young British researchers is becoming increasingly poor.

Should the Committee have any questions regarding this submission, please contact:

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² Personal communication

³ <http://www.bihip.org/>