Forestry around the World

Forestry in Ireland: The Reformation of a Deforested Country

By Richard O’Hanlon

Changes in forest cover in Ireland. The dotted lines are estimated values.

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The natural vegetation of Ireland is one of temperate woodland, similar to that found in mainland Europe and Britain, due to a combination of factors, such as the island’s size, island isolation, and glacial history. The last ice age in Ireland ended about 18,000 years ago, with the first plants arriving about 14,000 years ago from Beringia to the east, and about 11,000 years ago from the Mediterranean to the west. The earliest trees to arrive were birch (Betula) about 9,000 years ago. The pine and elm later became established along the Irish coast, where raw materials could be utilized for ships and barrel-making, and the oak bark used for tanning leather. A bonus to the English settlers of removing Irish forest cover was the finding places for the Irish rebels who fought against English rule.

The overexploitation of Irish forests continued throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, despite several laws passed by the then government meant to protect the remaining forest cover. The end of the 19th century showed a turning point, with the first (albeit small) increases in forest cover in centuries recorded, possibly as a result of planting grants and the increased forests granted by the Royal Dublin Society. The Great Famine further reduced the population of Ireland from eight to four million individuals, ultimately allowing Ireland to start from a very low forest cover.

The beginning of the 20th century heralded more positive times for Irish forestry, with the creation of the State Forestry Department and the establishment of the Forest Service, under national ownership at the end of 1913. Some 19 years later, the Irish Free State was created, after breaking free from British rule, and it followed that the Forest Service (later known as the Forest Service) was established to acquire lands with a view to planting forest on them and also to acquire and manage Ireland’s existing forests. Further developments in the 20th century included the establishment of the Society of Irish Foresters, a significant positive move for the development of Irish forestry, according to a letter of congratulations from the then President of the Society of American Foresters, Henry Schmitz.

Levels of forest cover continued to rise slowly until the late 1980s, when afforestation by private landowners, particularly farmers, was encouraged through generous grants funded by the European Economic Community (later known as the European Community). These measures led to levels of private forest planting increasing 15 to 20 fold over the ensuing 20 years. In 1988, Coillte (from the Government Green Bank) was established as a state-owned commercial forestry company to manage all state forests. This has been estimated that more than 460,000 hectares (7 percent) of Ireland was forested.

Growing for the Future

In 1996, the Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry published an optimistic plan to guide Irish forestry into the near future. The plan, titled, “Growing for the Future—a Strategic Plan for the Development of the Forestry Sector in Ireland,” was scrutinized by every aspect of Irish forestry and set out goals to be reached by the industry by 2030. One of the main goals was to increase forest cover from the 464,000 hectares (7 percent of land cover) in 1996 to 1.2 million hectares (17 percent) by 2030. The majority of this increase was to be achieved through a combination of afforestation of agriculturally unsuitable lands, (wet mineral soils, cut-away bogs) and through the continued conversion of agricultural lands to forests. The plan also sought to reverse the trend from a largely publicly owned forest inventory to a situation whereby the majority of forests were privately owned. The increase in forest area was to result in an estimated fourfold increase in timber production from Irish forests, which in turn would lead to increased wood and wood products exports, and create thousands of jobs.

The planted increases in forest area necessitated that the environmental conditions of this large-scale land use change be considered. The publication of the “Forest Biodiversity Guidelines” in 2000 by the Forest Service ensures that all Irish forests conserve or increase biodiversity, thus adhering to the principles of sustainable forest management. Current biodiversity enhancement rules stipulate that all forests must be of mixed species, mature trees must be retained after harvests, open areas must be

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Started around 1390, as land was cleared for agriculture and grazing. Rapid expansion of the country’s population necessitated that forests be cleared to increase food production. Further areas of woodlands were cleared toward the end of the 16th century, as the exploitation of Irish woods by English settlers began.

By 1600, it is estimated that only 1 percent of the country was forested. Around this time, English forests were close to exhaustion, and Irish woods were seen as a cheap source of wood to fuel English industries. It followed that many English iron- and glass-working factories were established along the Irish coast, where raw materials could be imported, the abundant wood burned to provide heat, and the finished product exported back to England. As wood in England was more than seven times more expensive at the time, this business plan made economic sense. The wood of Irish oak and beech forests was also used as building material for ships and barrel-making, and the oak bark used for tanning leather. A bonus to the English settlers of removing Irish forest cover was the finding places for the Irish rebels who fought against English rule.

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