

Irish Forestry: No Blarney!

by Nancy Young

Although the countries of Ireland and Scotland are known for many things (hospitality, history, whisky, beer, etc), their forests are not generally one of them. In both countries, their rugged landscapes and long histories of battles and agriculture have lead them from being forested nations following the ice age (complete with a culture based upon the reverence of trees and nature) to a state of near barrenness (2% forest cover). The economic upswing of the 'Celtic Tiger' in the last decade has awakened a new purpose in these countries: to be more self-sustainable. This has shifted the focus onto forest re-establishment to reduce import dependence, sequester carbon, and restore the local biodiversity - to the degree that nearly every public forest is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

On a recent 'farm forestry tour' with AngLatin (a company that organizes international professional development tours in forestry, agriculture, viticulture, etc.), I had the unique opportunity to learn about the fascinating culture, history, and forests of Ireland and Scotland. It was an incredible chance to experience both the tourist destinations as well as to stray off the beaten path and into the woods to meet with the professionals who manage them. During the tour I observed several parallels and divergences in forest management from my experience in Canada; these ideas (which follow below) were presented to the Algonquin Section of the Canadian Institute of Forestry in February for their annual International Night.



AngLatin Travel tour group in 50 year old Sitka Spruce stand in Glendine, Ireland with the President of Society of Irish Foresters and Coillte (far right).

In many ways forestry in Scotland and Ireland is similar to Canada. For example, most forests are publicly owned but operated and managed by a private company (Coillte Teoranta: the Irish Forestry Board). Most industry is in primary production, but there is very clear movement towards value added and biofuels. All three countries even plant Sitka spruce from British Columbia! In terms of forestry extension, various research organizations (COFORD, Forest Research) manage their own extension programs related to their particular projects; Teagasc (Agriculture and Food Development Authority) is the primary vehicle for extension and promotion of forest planting and stewardship to farmers and other landowners in Ireland.

Despite these similarities there are also some glaring differences between Irish, Scottish, and Canadian forestry. For one, the forest area in both Ireland and Scotland is roughly equal to that of Algonquin Park! Transportation issues are virtually non-existent on these European islands, with the average wood supply catchment area for a mill being a radius of 50km. The other benefit of being an island nation is the ability to have stringent and enforceable international transportation laws; this has resulted in Ireland and Scotland having only a few insect pests and pathogens of concern in their woodlands. Blowdown and large pine weevil (*Hylobius abietis*) are the most significant natural disturbance agents. The agrarian history of these countries has inevitably lead to a crop-style of forestry – planting single species at high densities and commercially thinning on short rotations (made possible by the temperate climate and longer growing season). The mills and harvesting equipment are heavily Finnish-influenced and most mills are small-scale enough to run on their own wood processing residues burning in highly efficient combustion furnaces. As foresters in Ireland and Scotland have essentially started from scratch putting forests back on the landscape which is steeped in history and archaeology, several of the management guidelines are quite different from those we have in Canada. For example, whereas in Canada cultural heritage sites and water bodies are protected by keeping harvesting activities a specific distance away from the value, in Europe it is the planting activities that are buffered from these sites. Many of the noted differences in forest management between the countries are simply linked to geography and history; however there is also a very clear difference in attitude towards forestry both by the public and foresters themselves.

One of the most remarkable points about forestry in these Celtic lands was the very strong emphasis on positive marketing and integration with recreation and education. The 7 Stanes program in Scotland's 'National Forest Parks' was the best example of this, and I believe may hold potential for adoption in Algonquin Park (the only park in Canada to allow logging). These parks are owned by the Forestry Commission (both government and industry) and comprise regular forest operations with integrated interpretive trails about forestry, and even multiple levels of mountain bike trails and skills training tracks!



7 Stanes Mountain bike trails at Glentress, Tweed Valley Forest Park, Scotland.

These parks also have educational centres where visitors can view live video feeds of osprey in their nests (this species has returned to Scotland as a result of forestry), and learn about logging history. 'Go Ape' attracts the more adventurous crowd to zipline over the forest canopy, and some parks even offer big name outdoor concerts in the forest (i.e. KT Tunstall, Coldplay, etc)! This is a brilliant way to get people

outside, active, and enjoying the natural resources that have returned to Scotland while learning firsthand about the industry that is helping to sustain their country.

While Canada clearly has a longer history of forestry and seemingly more expertise in terms of silvicultural variety, I believe there is much we can learn from Irish and Scottish foresters. The one that truly struck home for me is the positive attitude towards forestry as a profession: they promote themselves and their occupation very well and are dedicated to promoting forest establishment, and drawing people out to see how their forests are being managed! This excursion was an eye-opening, broadening experience for me and I am very grateful to the Canadian Institute of Forestry, the Canadian Forest Service, and the Forestry Research Partnership for their support of my professional development. Slainte!