

The National Forest: an exemplar of Sustainable Development

Defra Sustainable Development Unit, National Forest Company



THE NATIONAL
FOREST

Introduction

The research

To measure the impact and contribution of The National Forest to sustainable development (SD), and to produce a Sustainable Development Action Plan (SDAP) for the National Forest Company (NFC). Progress was monitored against 20 environmental, economic and social indicators that represent a balanced contribution to the SD of the Forest area, and support both the UK SD Strategy and The National Forest Strategy 2004-14. Three case studies were also written up to highlight The National Forest's role in stimulating coalfield regeneration, rural diversification and business and community involvement. Progress against the SD indicators and the NFC's SDAP will be updated every 3 years, with the next update planned in 2010.

Why do it?

Sustainable development has been the guiding principle of The National Forest's approach since the publication of the first National Forest Strategy in 1993. The UK Government's SD strategy, *Securing the Future*¹ (2005), prompted the NFC to take an active role in monitoring the Forest's creation against SD principles. The approach taken provides a basis for measuring the Forest's SD progress and demonstrates its contribution to national SD reporting.

Aims & objectives

- To assess the status of The National Forest as an exemplar of SD and provide a reliable and robust baseline for future monitoring.
- To measure and monitor the contribution of The National Forest to the UK SD Strategy.
- To identify future priorities for the achievement of SD by the NFC and partner organisations.
- To provide a model of approach to adapting national indicators to the local setting, that could be replicated by other organisations.
- To demonstrate the NFC's role in taking responsibility for its own operations and impacts in relation to SD.

The Project

Description

The project was developed by the NFC with support from the Defra SD Unit. Defra, as the SD champion across government, recognised the project's national significance in helping to influence how government departments, delivery bodies and other organisations might adopt similar approaches to SD reporting. Data was collected against a set of 20 environmental, economic and social indicators which best reflect the multi-purpose benefits of the Forest's creation. The results were presented in a report *The National Forest: an Exemplar of Sustainable Development*² in 2007.

Approach

A project steering group was set up to identify potential indicators. The choice of indicators was guided by the national SD indicator set, regional and local indicators and independent SDAPs. Indicators were also selected for which data was available, reliable, regularly collected, easy to update and obtainable at reasonable or no cost. The resulting 20 indicators represent a mix of ten UK framework and eight supporting indicators (disaggregated to a local level), alongside two bespoke indicators relevant to The National Forest. Data to support the indicators was collected by the NFC with support from the Defra SD Unit, and where possible, was based upon the Forest boundary.

Timescales

2006/7 Data collection and SD report compiled over an eight month period.

2007 Report launched and the findings disseminated (see below).

Budget

NFC - in-house staff time (£20,000).

Defra SD Unit – secondee provided over five months (£10,000).

Report production - £4,039, including VAT.

Results

Outcomes

The report provides evidence for substantial progress against the 20 indicators and demonstrates how they directly contribute towards national SD objectives. The effects are wide ranging and include (as at June 2007):

Environmental:

- Woodland cover increased from 6 - 17.5% since 1991. This has helped to sequester 50 kilo-tonnes of carbon and remove 182m kg of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.
- Visible, sustainable landscape change has been achieved: through habitat creation and management (1,800 ha); agricultural diversification (3,360 ha of Forest related schemes); and the reclamation of derelict and mineral worked land to Forest uses (1,205 ha).
- The Forest is significantly improving habitats for woodland and farmland birds.

Economic:

- Employment rates in the area are greater than the regional and national average, whilst unemployment is significantly lower. Over 4,200 jobs are supported in tourism and the woodland economy.
- The Forest area received £115m of investment in regeneration between 1995 - 2006.
- Socio-economic performance across the area is generally robust, although pockets of deprivation exist within parts of the former coalfield and Burton upon Trent.

Social:

- The proportion of the Forest's population living in the most deprived areas in England declined from 26% to 16%, between 2000 – 2004.
- There are high levels of public satisfaction with The National Forest; and most of the population live within 500m of an accessible woodland.
- The Forest contributes strongly to SD education (200,000 children involved between 1995 – 2006). Around 13% of children and 13% of adults (13,400 people) attending Forest activities each year, come from socially excluded groups.

In 2008, the NFC and partner organisations won the inaugural SD UK Award, based upon the transformation of the Ashby Woulds area of the Forest, written up as a case study in the report.

Applications

- The report provides a tool to promote SD principles and best practice and encourage wider uptake of SD reporting by other local, regional and national organisations.
- The approach and reporting format provides a simple and effective template which other organisations could adopt for their SD reporting.
- The report demonstrates how effective baselines for SD reporting can be established, making future reporting of progress easily measurable.

Further information

Dissemination

- The National Forest: an exemplar of Sustainable Development (2007) was widely promoted by mail and through the NFC website.
- Launch event with Defra in 2007.
- Publicity and media coverage associated with winning the SD UK Award in 2008.
- The NFC's Forest Scene newsletter.
- NFC research review seminar 2010.
- NFC website www.nationalforest.org

Links to published work

- ¹ *Securing the Future: The UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy* (2005). Cm. 6467. www.defra.gov.uk/sustainable/government/publications/uk-strategy/index.htm
- ² *The National Forest: an exemplar of Sustainable Development* (2007). The National Forest Company. www.nationalforest.org/document/research/sustainability_report.pdf

Diagrams



Stretching the web

A technique advocated by Defra, which was used at the National Forest Forum in 2007, to explore the perceived sustainability of the Forest area with partner organisations. This exercise will be repeated periodically to test perceived directions of change in the sustainability of the Forest area.

For more information go to: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/sustainable/think/stretch/index.htm>

Key:

- 4 Good
- 3 Above average
- 2 Below average
- 1 Poor.

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