



Growing places

A study of social change in The National Forest



Jake Morris and John Urry

A Lancaster University Research Project with
the National Forest Company and the Forestry Commission



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Keywords: access, landscape change, perception, social capital, social change, sustainable development, The National Forest

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Foreword

The National Forest is a vast, new Forest in the making that is transforming the physical, economic and social landscape across 200 square miles (520 km²) of central England. The changing physical environment is evident in the 6 million trees that have already been planted. This has increased woodland cover from 6 to 16% in a little over a decade. A rejuvenated and diversifying local economy is also evident with growing inward investment, a developing visitor economy, falling unemployment and rising house prices.

The social aspects of the Forest's sustainable development are also a fundamental part of its creation and are crucial to its success. This innovative 5-month study between Lancaster University, the Forestry Commission and the National Forest Company has set out to capture local perceptions about the evolving Forest. It highlights the important interface between the physical growth of the Forest and local communities' changing social experiences of it. The study seeks to define how a healthier, green and more economically diverse environment can vastly improve the quality of life of local residents and visitors to the area.

Growing places is a very timely piece of research as it will help to inform the social development of The National Forest over its next 10 years. This social dimension of sustainability is a relatively new area of academic study, which is also of great interest in the context of changing landscapes across the UK and Europe. The lessons from The National Forest will be particularly relevant to other forest creation initiatives, coalfield regeneration areas and rural landscapes affected by Common Agricultural Policy reform. *Growing places* confirms our early aspirations by clearly demonstrating how creative and purposeful landscape change has been a positive force in shaping a new sense of place and identity in the area now known as The National Forest.



Susan Bell OBE

Executive summary

This publication presents the results of a 5-month research project into the social impacts of The National Forest. *Growing places* started with the recognition that the Forest is gaining a reputation as a place that is 'on the move'. In response to guidance provided by the National Forest Company and the Forestry Commission, the research aimed to look at the ways in which this area of 'loss' is being turned into an area of 'growth', and to begin to explore the possible linkages between changes to the natural environment (restoration/landscape change through afforestation) and the changing lives of people who live, work and spend their leisure time in the Forest area. The research involves a 'compressed ethnography'. The principal method was to participate in groups or with individuals as they engage in a range of activities: going for walks, making site visits, working on farms, planting trees, attending meetings, taking photographs and doing volunteer work. In addition, formal interviews were conducted with a wide range of people involved in forest-related activities, projects or initiatives (see page 44 for a list of respondents); as well as desk- and web-research of official reports and documentation.



Landscape change in Swadlincote.

Overall conclusions

- The National Forest is positively perceived. For most respondents the Forest is closely associated with improving environmental and economic conditions. These positive perceptions of place feed into a growing trust and support for the 'institutional' Forest (National Forest Company and partner organisations), a willingness to be associated with the Forest brand, and an optimistic, forward-looking vision for the area. The publication presents evidence of emergent Forest identities that are based on these positive meanings and values.
- Social interactions are the dominant feature of Forest experiences. There are strong linkages between landscape change and a developing Forest 'sociality', with forested places providing the setting for the reconfiguration of social networks and new forms of 'connectedness'. It seems, furthermore, that forested places are themselves playing a part in these processes of reconfiguration by influencing discussions about the behaviour of Forest users. There are indications at this stage, therefore, that not only trees, but also communities, are growing in The National Forest.
- Through analyses and descriptions of physical, visual and mental access, there are important linkages between the changing physical and social environments of the Forest. In particular, an increase in access is leading to a significant transformation of the relationship between farmers and the wider community. The research has also shown that the issue of access is key to understanding the relationship between people and the Forest itself. In particular, mental access to forested sites is shown to involve acts of remembering the area's industrial past and of imagining its future.
- There are some important linkages between the Forest and the area's changing economy. In particular, the publication presents an analysis of the Forest as a catalyst for new networks of co-operation between economic and political actors.

Future research

Future research should involve:

- **A more detailed examination of the linkages between changes in the physical environment, the reconfiguration of social networks and new forms of social 'connectedness'.** Furthermore, building on the discovery that the Forest itself is implicated in this process of reconfiguration, future research will develop frameworks which capture this complex interplay between the 'natural' and 'social' Forests, to provide data that can be factored into measurements of sustainable development in the Forest.
- **An analysis of the role played by multiple organisations and networks in natural resource and heritage conservation.** In particular, it is necessary to examine the involvement of multiple publics in conservation initiatives, and to explore the wider policy implications of the production of 'new nature' and 'new heritage' in The National Forest.
- **Greater examination of the issue of access.** Differing opportunities for access should be explored across various social groups living in, working in, or visiting the forest. This will show how access varies in terms of income, gender, ethnicity and age, access to transport, and location. Future research will also explore further the various forms of 'ex-situ' physical and mental access to forested sites that are described in this publication. This work could be geared towards the production of 'experiential maps', depicting not only the location and extent of forested sites but also the location, extent, character and intensity of peoples' access to them.

- **An analysis of the contribution that the Forest is making to the local, regional and national economies.** The research should give particular emphasis to how the Forest's positive environmental, social and ethical associations deliver various direct and indirect benefits to individuals and organisations that are involved with forest-related activities and initiatives. These might include improved employee morale, a more positive outlook on life, and other mental and physical health benefits. Ongoing research, therefore, will enable the analysis and development of a range of qualitative processes that could be factored into assessments of sustainable social and economic development in The National Forest. These new measurements will capture the extent and quality of social interaction, physical and mental health benefits, improved facilities for physical, mental and visual access, and capacity building at the local level.

PART 1

Introduction



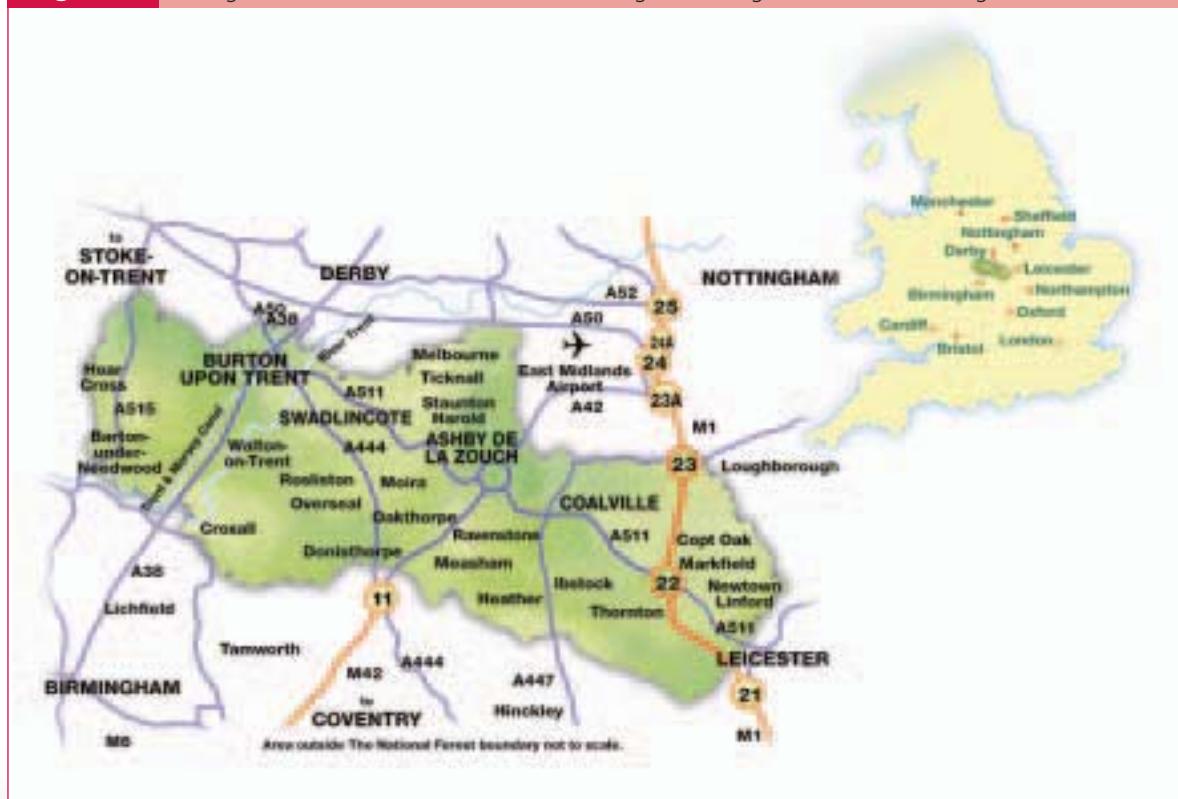
Part 1 sets out the context for this publication by providing background information about The National Forest, its objectives and delivery mechanisms. The brief for the *Growing places* project is then discussed and recent studies of socio-economic change in The National Forest are referenced. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the research methods used.

A Forest for the nation



The National Forest encompasses 200 square miles (520 km²) of the heart of England spanning parts of Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire (Figure 1). It aims to link the remnant ancient forests of Needwood and Charnwood and includes within its boundary a substantial area of the former Leicestershire and South Derbyshire Coalfield, the attractive farmland landscapes of South Derbyshire, the industrialised Trent Valley corridor and a number of towns, villages and hamlets.

Figure 1 A huge National Forest for the nation is being created right at the heart of England.



The idea is to create a vast new forested landscape for the nation, with the aim of increasing woodland from a 6% starting point to eventually cover around a third of the area. Since 1991 woodland cover has already increased to over 16%, with the planting of over 6 million trees.

Spearheading the initiative is the National Forest Company (NFC), established by Government in 1995. The Company is sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and is responsible for implementing the Government-approved National Forest Strategy – the future vision for the Forest. The Company works in partnership with a wide range of public, private and voluntary organisations, landowners and local communities to fulfil the Forest vision.

But the Forest is about far more than trees. It is creating a major new resource for recreation and tourism, providing new wildlife habitats, restoring damaged landscapes and offering attractive, productive uses of farmland. It is also helping to stimulate the local economy, with an increasing emphasis on developing a new woodland economy for the area. One of the principal mechanisms of delivery is the Tender Scheme, which is discussed at various points in this publication (for example, see pages 27 and 39). The Scheme is a unique woodland incentive run by the NFC in partnership with the Forestry Commission (FC); it invites applications from landowners outlining a plan for woodland they want to create and manage and how much money they need to do it. Typically, the Scheme enables landowners to diversify their landholding and business interests, to create commercial and/or amenity woodland and can be linked with work that enhances or creates opportunities for recreation, access and tourism.



Research context and brief



The starting point for the *Growing places* five-month research project was the recognition that The National Forest is a place that seems to be ‘on the move’¹ – the area’s physical environment has dramatically changed in recent years, property prices are rising, more people are moving into the area, unemployment figures are falling, visitor numbers are increasing, the area is attracting inward investment and, in general, local support is strong. The National Forest’s ‘mobility’ is indicated in two recent pieces of research. First, an assessment of the socio-economic impacts of The National Forest by Staffordshire University’s Centre for Economic and Social Regeneration highlights some of the direct and indirect effects of National Forest actions. These include: more positive outlooks within businesses and communities, emerging visions for future sustainable regeneration, employment creation and safeguarding in forestry, conservation and tourism, evidence of successful farm business diversification, a healthier property market and a growth in the number and average spend of visitors to the area (Ball *et al.*, 2004). Second, a Cardiff University study of the relationship between forestry and social inclusion, which uses The National Forest as one of three case study areas, points to the Forest’s success both in terms of regenerating derelict land and of changing public awareness and identities, allowing the fostering of suitable conditions for the alleviation of social exclusion (Kitchen *et al.*, in preparation).

Growing places represents a further examination of these changes: it grows out of an ongoing relationship between the FC and Lancaster University and is preceded by various research projects and activities. Research funded by the FC and conducted by the Centre for the Study of Environmental Change (CSEC) in the late 1990s applied new understandings of social, cultural and environmental issues to a study of public attitudes towards, and uses of, British woodland (Macnaghten *et al.*, 1998). Building on this, Macnaghten and Urry revisited data from the 1998 study to show how trees and woods actively shape people’s embodied experiences of forested areas (2001a; 2001b). More recently, another CSEC research project reviewed changing patterns of use, governance and public participation within UK forestry (Weldon, 2003).

This current study, based in the newly formed Centre for Mobilities Research (CeMoRe), builds on this body of research. At the project’s inception, it was envisaged that work in The National Forest might reveal ways in which this innovative and progressive model of social forestry was resulting, not only in the growth of trees, but also in the growth of communities. It is in this double sense that the title for the project, and subsequently for the publication, was intended. Such a project would not only throw up some interesting topics for future academic research, but would also help the FC and the NFC in pioneering a re-imagining and relocation of forested places as engines for sustainable development in the UK.

¹ Elsewhere it has been argued that places, because they are implicated within complex networks of exchange between groups, individuals and organisations, are not necessarily fixed and static but have a capacity to move around in relationship to the centre and periphery of a given society (see especially Sheller and Urry, 2006; Hetherington, 1997).

As a major landowner with a strengthening remit to adopt socially, environmentally and economically sustainable approaches to forestry, the FC is clearly interested in The National Forest's 'mobility'. In particular, the FC wanted research undertaken which would begin to uncover some of the issues pertinent to an understanding of how this area of social, economic and environmental deprivation and 'loss' may be being turned into an area of growth. It was suspected from the start that there would be some interesting linkages between The National Forest as a changing place and the transformed identities of people who live, work and spend their leisure time there. In other words, the partners hoped that the research, through the description and analysis of a wide range of forestry- and non-forestry-related activities, would uncover some of the ways in which different senses of place and identities are both constructing and constructed by The National Forest. In the long term, it is hoped that a deeper understanding of the Forest's successes might provide some lessons that can be applied to other areas where forestry, as a potential vehicle for regeneration and sustainable development, is not having anything like such a positive impact.²

The NFC also took a keen interest in this research project, and sought for it to address various issues central to its work. In general, the NFC wanted the research to build on the Staffordshire and Cardiff University studies by extending their analyses of the possible linkages between changes on the ground (e.g. landscape regeneration through afforestation) and transformations in its social makeup and uses for recreation and tourism. In addition, the NFC provided specific questions that they felt should be addressed by the research:

- How do people who live in the Forest perceive the changes that have taken place over the past 10 years, and do institutional/professional perceptions of positive change marry with local perceptions?
- What are the linkages between changes to the natural environment and the changing lives of people who live, work and spend their leisure time in the Forest?
- What is the relationship between the Forest as it is spoken/written about (branding, signage and PR publications) and the Forest as a physical place? What part do these 'discursive' and 'real' National Forests play in changing perceptions?
- How do perceptions of change in the central coalfield area compare with other urban and rural areas in the Forest?
- What motivates 'active' participants in the Forest through involvement in activities such as tree planting, volunteer work and education initiatives? Why are others more 'passive', and what does participating passively involve?
- How do the NFC's partner organisations and other 'client groups' view the Forest?

² Kitchen *et al.* (in preparation) present a comparative study of social exclusion and inclusion in The National Forest, the Great North Forest and Central Scotland Forest.

Methodology



The initial phase of research involved desk- and web-based research: reading reports from research in the Forest, collecting strategic documents and project reports from the FC, NFC and partner organisations, and identifying broader literature on regeneration, place, identity, forestry and leisure/tourism. The next step was to undertake a qualitative study of social change in the Forest. This was based in part on the considerable amount of quantitative research and statistical analysis already present in the Staffordshire University report (Ball *et al.*, 2004), and in part on the desire to explore ways in which different perceptual frameworks, senses of place and identities both construct and are constructed by the Forest. In other words, rather than trying to infer the social *results* of landscape change from various socio-economic statistics and the evidence provided by informants, this research aimed to take a brief look at actual *processes* of landscape and social change as they were played out in the Forest between January and May 2005. As such, *Growing places* reflects an attempt to analyse meanings and values as evidenced by various forms of *situated* speech and action.

Broadly speaking, this publication presents the findings of what could be termed a ‘compressed ethnography’³ of life in the Forest, involving the researcher being present in ‘sites’ of speech and action wherein the relationship between the physical and the social aspects would be played out. In turn, this involved spending time with and talking to groups and individuals as they engaged practically in forest- or non-forest-related activities. These activities included walking (Figure 2), going on site and educational visits (Figure 3), farm work, tree planting (Figure 4), attending meetings, photography and volunteer work. This ethnography was favoured because it meant that responses to the research questions introduced during these activities were contextualised by ‘hands-on’ experiences of places within the Forest.

Figure 2 Walking at Sence Valley Forest Park, Ibstock, Leicestershire.



³ Ethnography represents a specific branch of anthropology where qualitative research processes and products are aimed at ‘thick’ cultural interpretation. The ethnographer’s aim is to go beyond reporting events and details of experience and to try to explain how these derive from and represent the webs of meaning in which people live. Ethnographic research usually involves long periods of time immersed within people’s patterns of everyday life. ‘Compressed ethnography’, therefore, refers to shorter periods of time immersed within the day-to-day lives of sets of respondents.

Figure 3 Admiring the orb at Conkers, a visitor centre in the heart of the Forest.



In addition to being present in various sites of speech and action, the researcher also joined in with these activities, becoming not only an observer, but also a participant. Drawing on previous research experience (Morris, 2004), it was felt that by getting practically involved, the researcher would *himself* be able to experience directly the relationship between people and place.⁴ So the researcher not only observed and talked to walkers, but experienced places by walking through them himself, helped gather information on site visits, built bridges and fences, planted trees, participated in meetings, took photographs, and carried out a range of volunteer tasks. This added a further analytical dimension to the research by allowing the researcher to become an active participant in the very processes of constructing and being constructed by the Forest.

As a third element of this 'compressed ethnography', 45 interviews were conducted with a wide range of respondents. These included people from local groups, clubs and organisations, volunteers, employees from the NFC and the FC, representatives of local government (county, district and parish councils), staff from Regional Development Agencies and their Sub-Regional Strategic Partnerships, local businessmen and women, and employees from one multinational company (for a list of research respondents, see page 44). Interviews were individually tailored to each respondent, allowing the researcher to focus on specific issues and areas of interest. There were, however, topics that were common to most interviews conducted. These included the precise nature of, and reasons behind, an organisation's or individual's involvement with the NFC, the uses made of the Forest (personal or organisational), processes of identity forming (personal and organisational), perceptions of change since the Forest's inception in 1995 and views on future development opportunities.

⁴ Malinowski (1922) was an early advocate of balancing observations with direct participation as part of research methodology. He argued that: 'it is good for the ethnographer to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on' (1922; 21). For Malinowski, joining in helps the ethnographer in his efforts: 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world' (1922; 25).

The National Forest has a population of around 200 000 people (National Forest Company, 2004) and is the setting for a wide variety of forest- and non-forest-related initiatives, projects and activities involving a large number of participant organisations, groups and individuals. Rather than providing a categorical account of life in the Forest, therefore, *Growing places* aims to provide some interesting insights into the social changes taking place there. The strength and credibility of these insights lies in the fact that they are couched in detailed descriptions of a wide array of first-hand research experiences.

Growing places presents the results of qualitative research undertaken within a wide range of settings. Purposive sampling was undertaken. Sample spread was also dictated by the nature of research access to people, organisations, places and activities that were mostly dependent on introductions from NFC and FC staff members. The findings on farming in The National Forest are based on interviews, conversations and shared activities upon four farms and should not be taken as necessarily representing wider regional trends.

Also, because of limited research access, this publication does not address all the research needs expressed by NFC and FC during the initial phases. For example, it proved extremely difficult to gain access to the Forest's 'passive participants' (see page 12). This was mostly because the fieldwork relied heavily upon introductions from the FC and NFC and tended to gravitate towards individuals and organisations with an obvious involvement in forest-related activities and initiatives. Data on the experiences of tourists within the Forest are limited to a few encounters with visitors and evidence gained from interviews with tourism providers and other professionals. It is hoped that Lancaster University's future proposals for research in the Forest will allow more time and resources to overcome these limitations.⁵

Figure 4 Tree planting at Staunton Harold, Leicestershire.



⁵ With respect to gaining access to The National Forest's 'passive participants' it is hoped that future research will allow a series of focus groups to be conducted.

PART 2

Key findings



Part 2 sets out the key findings of the *Growing places* research project:

- An analysis of perception reveals how respondents are making the connection between The National Forest's improving environment and a range of socio-economic changes.
- Evidence of The National Forest as primarily a social space is presented. This is illustrated by the meanings that respondents attach to their locality and in various forest-related activities where social exchange is the dominant feature.
- The provision of new opportunities for physical, visual and mental access in The National Forest is shown to be another significant driver of social change in the area.
- The results of qualitative interviews are used to present drivers of social and economic development in the Forest.

Perceptions of The National Forest



Growing places reveals that, overall, the Forest is very positively perceived by most respondents, including local people, visitors, staff members of small and large companies, and representatives of local government and other partner organisations. There is, though, a lingering cynicism about The National Forest, linked to how the trees are only just starting to make a visible impact on the landscape. A comment such as: '*National Forest? What National Forest?*' is rarely made directly, however, but is reported as something that 'some people' still say. There was also some evidence of negative perceptions, typically associated with newly planted sites.

As discussed in the Introduction, this research analyses how The National Forest is perceived, with a particular focus on perceptions of environmental change. In this section of the publication we illustrate some of the different ways in which the Forest is perceived and show how these perceptual frameworks are indicative of some principal meanings identifiable within the Forest.

Here 'perception' is understood as distinct from the simple intake of data received by the senses. The difference is that perception implies the processing and interpretation of that sense data. The relationship between observation and perception is rather like that of a shopper who not only sees items and their price tags, but also makes judgements about whether an item is cheap, expensive, fashionable, tasteful, a good deal or over-priced. It is in the interpretation of data received by the senses that the act of perception occurs. An analysis of perception, therefore, reveals the ways in which the meanings and values inherent in different experiences of The National Forest are changing in response to the transformation of the physical environment. As such, an analysis of perception provides an insight into the Forest's 'mobility'.

An improving environment

Various positive meanings and values are associated with the Forest and revealed in speech and by actions. First, for most respondents there is a close association between the Forest and the very noticeable improvements to the area's physical environment (Figure 5a and b). Not only landscape change and afforestation as the result of NFC initiatives, but also changes brought about by a wide range of associated organisations are all closely linked with cleaner air, cleaner places (roads, hedges, streets, houses) and increasing biodiversity (Figure 6a and b).

Figure 5 Before and after: (a) industrial past – Rawdon Colliery; (b) Conkers visitor centre.



For many older respondents especially, environmental change is talked about by making comparisons with the area's 'dirty' industrial past (see Figure 5):

...one time you could be at the top of Alexander Hill [in Swadlincote], or where the ski slope now is, and you couldn't see the town for all the smoke, coal smoke and smoke from the salt glaze... you didn't stop long when you went shopping!

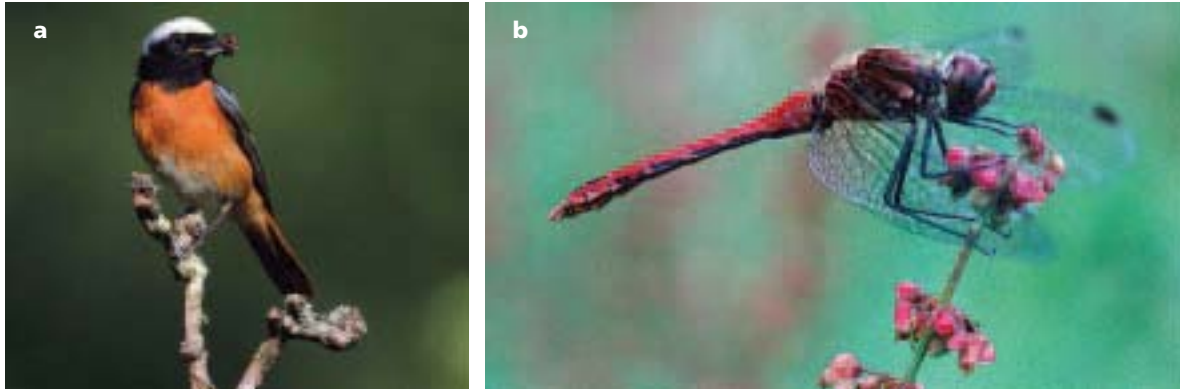
Local resident

One way you notice the changes in the area... they've got rid of the grime. People used to avoid driving through Albert village because their cars would get plastered in clay dust and mud. Horrible, dusty, grey verges and hedges.⁶

Local resident

⁶ Here it is interesting to note the use of *'they've'* to indicate a potentially large number of organisations and individuals who are responsible for a better environment. There was often a strong tendency for respondents to lump organisations together in this way under the general heading of 'The National Forest', often referred to simply as 'The Forest'.

Figure 6 Habitat improvements are linked to increasing numbers of certain animal and plant species, for example (a) redstart and (b) ruddy darter.



For others, the increase in the number and frequency of animal and bird sightings expresses the connections between environmental improvements and The National Forest:

We've got sand martins at Sence now.

Local resident

It was amazing how quickly the wildlife moved in after the planting... skylarks, buzzards, deer.

Tender Scheme winner

An improving economy

Positive perceptions are for many respondents indicated by a definite, albeit qualified, connection that is made between the Forest and improving economic conditions.⁷ One respondent, for example, makes the link between The National Forest and new business opportunities (see Figure 7, for example):

... it's amazing what they've achieved: businesses are growing up, you've got fencing, forestry support industries, leisure industries.

Local businessman

Another person makes the link between decisions by businesses to relocate in the area, and the improving environment:

they can see the quality of the environment... they can say: 'look what a lovely environment we work in'...

Local government employee

For many other respondents the most important economic link is expressed in the Forest's rising property prices:

Now with the Forest, people have started to move in to the area. Five years ago the first house in Moira sold for £100,000... recently it's been the first for £200,000. Housing prices are a major topic of conversation in the area and that's really changed people's attitudes. They see what the Forest's done... this place is really on the up...

Local resident

Figure 7 Start-up business – National Forest Spring Water.



⁷ As discussed in more detail in 'The political economy of The National Forest' (page 36), most respondents were at pains to point out that The National Forest cannot take all the credit for an improving regional economy, which has, they feel, been brought about by a range of factors, including its central position in the UK, good transport links, labour supply and proximity to large conurbations like Birmingham and Leicester.

The physical and institutional Forests

Positive perceptions are also evident in the ways that respondents make connections between the Forest as a 'changing physical place' and the NFC itself. For many, it seems, the physical and institutional Forests are becoming synonymous. In particular, positive perceptions emerge through talk that reveals a growing trust in the 'institutional Forest', a trust that is continually bolstered by observations of welcomed changes to the 'physical Forest'. This trust for the NFC emerges as a significant value that is structuring people's perceptions of the Forest. Again, comparisons with the past figured significantly in many respondents' expressions of trust for the NFC (especially those amongst the ex-mining community):

We've had a history of broken promises with mineral companies... they went back on the pre-1947 agreement... just walked away leaving a mess socially and environmentally. Local people thought they had a moral duty to clean the place up afterwards, but they didn't. Local people approve of the Forest because they realise that there's a long-term commitment to clear up the mess.⁸

Local resident

Trust for the NFC also stems from acknowledging its long-term vision for the area. In this regard, also, there are some connections made between the company itself, which is seen as being 'here for the long haul' and some of the symbolic qualities of trees, which people perceive as permanent and enduring. Again, the link between the institutional and physical Forests is strong:

We're a business with a long-term vision, so we draw satisfaction and security that the Forest is there for the long haul.

Company employee

These trees aren't going anywhere, are they?

Company employee

For others, most notably one small business, trust for the NFC stems from an appreciation of the Company's willingness to communicate openly, to create partnerships, and to work with, rather than against, other organisations:

They're [the NFC] very flexible and understanding. They're not obsessed with getting the right number of trees to offset our emissions... they're more interested in developing relations and partnerships, and we respect that... we like to work like that.

Company employee

The National Forest brand

Positive perceptions are also evident in respondents' descriptions of The National Forest 'brand'. Data on brand emerged through discussions ranging from the general – the meanings associated with the institutional and physical Forests – to the more specific – people's interpretations of The National Forest's corporate identity as projected by logo and signage. Above all, positive perceptions of brand are evident in the respondents' desire to be associated with The National Forest, i.e. to create overlaps between its identity and their own. This was especially true of local business and local authority representatives.

⁸ Note the tendency to bunch a host of organisations and institutions under the general heading of 'the Forest'.

To market their own products, for example, many local businesses are using the Forest brand, which is visible on signage and in a wide range of NFC publications such as the newsletter shown in Figure 8. This can be through advertising their geographical position *'in the heart of The National Forest'*, a common practice amongst tourism service providers, or by using different connotations of The National Forest brand to send a message about their own product or service. These connotations fall into three main camps: 'green', 'local' and 'national'.⁹ The following quotations show how these different connotations are used to market products and services, or to say something about a company's own identity and brand:

Green: The National Forest is a powerful name, a very strong brand name... people like to be associated with it, it's nice, it's green... I wanted our product to be associated with that...

Local businessman

National: The National Forest is special because it's The *National* Forest. We're a company with a national and international client base, so it works for us...

Company employee

Local: The fact that it's [The National Forest] local is absolutely key for us... we wanted to do something locally... something where we are...

Company employee

Local authority association with the Forest brand also demonstrates these green, local and national connotations. Rather than for the marketing of products and services, however, local authorities use brand association to project a specific identity and to make connections with partner organisations operating at local, national and international levels, helping the development of a National Forest 'growth coalition' (Logan and Molotch, 1987). The following quotations show how local authorities are using the three connotations to reconfigure their own identities, or to strengthen strategic partnerships by communicating common purposes:

Green: Our new strap line is 'At the Heart of The National Forest', and we've changed our emblem to an oak leaf.

Local government employee

National: Now all six of our Euro MPs carry The National Forest logo on their letter head; it's gaining national and international recognition.

Local government employee

Local: We're pushing the idea that boundaries of jurisdiction are irrelevant in The National Forest. The National Forest is just as local to South Derbyshire as it is to North-West Leicestershire. We should all be pulling together a lot more, and The National Forest should help with that.

Local government employee



⁹ The issue of The National Forest being both 'local' and 'national' is discussed in detail in *The National Forest as a social space* (see page 24).

The future Forest

These positive perceptions are also seen in the way that many respondents talk excitedly about future developments in the Forest.¹⁰ This not only occurred while walking through newly planted sites (Figure 9) where being among young trees would provoke discussions about a 'potential landscape', but also in non-forest settings such as a respondent's office or house where a potential landscape had to be imagined. Furthermore, some respondents talked about their vision for a site where planting was planned, based on the transformations they had observed elsewhere. These invocations of the 'future Forest' are often tinged with a tone of impatience, as if respondents are willing an acceleration of the processes of landscape change:



I can imagine what it'll be like... I've seen it in other places.

Local resident

I can really imagine what it'll be like in 20 years. Of course, I'll be an old bugger by the time they (the trees) get to a decent size. Part of me wishes I'd started earlier...

Tender Scheme winner

It's going to be such an amazing place when the trees become established.

Local resident

Negative perceptions

In contrast with these respondents, a few are more critical of certain aspects of landscape change. These criticisms are typically voiced in relation to newly planted sites. Parishioners from Staunton Harold, for example, where land owned by the FC has been extensively planted, express concern about being 'walled in' by trees¹¹, and about threats to the genetic integrity of ancient woodlands that border the newly planted fields. Furthermore, one parishioner explained that she wasn't satisfied that FC consultation processes had led to substantial changes to the outline planting plan, and expressed annoyance at the seeming injustice of a planning permission process which imposed strict planning controls on local applicants, but which allowed the FC to 'radically alter the landscape forever'. Similarly, a neighbour to a Tender Scheme winning farm, which has seen fairly extensive planting, explained that he was concerned that the rear aspect of his property would be blocked by trees.¹²

Other respondents feel that newly planted sites are an eyesore. In particular, they complain about regimented rows of saplings, each with its plastic guard that, for some, make a site look like a war graveyard (for example, see Figure 10). Most of these respondents, however, appreciate that the guards are temporary, but some do not realise that the saplings will eventually be thinned, lessening the impression of regimented rows.

¹⁰ The issue of time, and the ways in which people access places in The National Forest by remembering the past and imagining the future, emerged as an interesting dimension of the research, and will be discussed in more detail in *Accessing The National Forest* (see page 30).

¹¹ This illustrates further the way in which respondents imagine a potential landscape.

¹² Both these examples illustrate the importance of visual access, an issue that is discussed in more detail in *Accessing The National Forest* (see page 32).

Figure 10 Recently planted site at Browns Wood showing saplings with guards still in place.



Although these negative perceptions are in the minority, they are important because they illustrate the politically sensitive nature of landscape change; there are 'contested natures' involved here (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998). In some respects, there are similarities between the critique outlined above and local resistances to, say, a new building appearing in an urban neighbourhood.

The message here is not simply that people do not like change, but rather they want their involvement in the decision-making processes to lead to specific changes to the plans which are the basis for consultation. These examples illustrate how tree planting is sometimes seen as the 'new build' in the Forest, and they highlight the need for a sensitive approach to site design involving meaningful public participation.

The National Forest as a social space



One might expect extensive and radical changes to the physical environment to be the main feature of emerging identities in the Forest. However, this research indicates that interactions between individuals and organisations, and within social groups, are what define people's experiences of this changing place. In this section we describe the 'sociality' of the Forest and show how it is evident in the way people identify with their locality, in various activities where different forms of social exchange are the dominant feature, and in various ways in which the Forest is shaping social life within the area.

The local Forest

The research findings indicate that for many people The National Forest is more the *local* Forest. With very few exceptions, local respondents do not say that they live or work in The National Forest, but give the name of a village or town. Many feel that 'The National Forest' is the name given to the area in order to attract visitors, and that 'Swad' (Swadlincote), 'Moirá', or 'Heather' is the place they call home.

People don't say they're from The National Forest. They say they're from Swad. It's part of them... where their family and friends are.

Local resident

A child from a local school was reported to have said that The National Forest was at the local branch of the supermarket Morrisons. His teacher explained that the roundabout at Morrisons has been planted with trees and sports a big sign saying 'The National Forest'. Another respondent explained that many people in the Charnwood area think that Charnwood itself is The National Forest. Another example is shown by a small, local company that wanted to offset the impact of its carbon emissions on the global environment by planting trees in the Forest '*because it's local*'.

Other groups of people travelled from all over the country to mark a significant event (birth, death, marriage, anniversary) by planting a tree. For these people also, it seems, the Forest holds connotations of 'localness', albeit experienced from a distance. In other words, the research suggest that people's sense of place centres around specific focal points such as the home, the village, the supermarket, a planting site, friends and family, and that these focal points are defined by everyday social interactions and activities such as visiting friends, shopping or going for a walk.

Some community tree planting events attract participants from all over the UK (Figure 11). For these visitors, interestingly, the conventional limits of locality can be stretched to incorporate places within the Forest. One man and his wife, for example, travelled all the way from Bristol to plant a tree in order to: *'spend a special day with my mother and to mark my father's death'* – a significant and symbolic activity that is normally carried out somewhere close to home, say in the graveyard of the parish church.¹³ In this case there was a blurring of the conventional distinctions between 'home' and 'away', 'host' and 'guest', as the visitors made a physical and symbolic journey both to and from the Forest. They were both physically and symbolically 'accommodated' within the planting site, leaving part of themselves behind when they left, but also absorbing and taking that place with them, making it part of ongoing family interactions and welcoming it into their own home:

We've been soaking up the atmosphere... it's been such a great day, and we'll have lots of special memories.
Tree planter

Figure 11 Community tree planting day at Staunton Harold.



Figure 12 Volunteers working on a dry stone wall at Outwoods.



The social Forest

As highlighted by the example of the visitors from Bristol, the research findings also strongly indicate that social interactions provide the primary medium through which people experience various places within the Forest. Interestingly, the sociality of experience is not limited to specifically non-forest-related activities, but is also apparent in overtly forest-related activities where interactions with the physical environment might be expected to be central in people's responses to interview questions. The research uncovered numerous examples of National Forest *sociality* (for example, see Figure 12). Volunteers volunteer, for example, primarily because they want to meet new people and/or to share a day with friends:

I come along every month to catch up with this lot... it's just a good crack, really...
Volunteer

¹³ This was not an isolated example of groups of people who travelled to The National Forest to plant trees to mark significant social/familial events.

As mentioned by other volunteers, people go on 'Walking the Way to Health' walks 'for the socialising', or 'for the companionship'. Small and large businesses dedicate resources to forestry-related Corporate Social Responsibility programmes in order to build relations with local communities, to develop employee skills and change outlooks: 'we're trying to build something socially within the company,' said one company employee.

Social interaction is also a very noticeable feature of the organisation and management activities of various organisations in the Forest. The NFC, for example, has become extremely adept at creating and nurturing partnerships with a wide range of institutions, organisations and companies, seeing this as one of the most important aspects of their work:

We would be nothing without the huge number of partner organisations we work with... we've known that right from the beginning.

NFC employee

These partnerships, furthermore, extend beyond professional bodies to incorporate a host of local individuals, groups and associations who are often closely involved in National Forest projects and initiatives. One FC staff member, for example, explained that the Commission is completely reliant upon the Sence Valley Volunteer Group for the day-to-day management of Sence Valley Forest Park:

They're our eyes and ears. There's no way we could run that place without them.

Another FC staff member highlighted his reliance upon local groups of enthusiasts to help him with his monitoring work:

I very much rely on their assistance to do what I do... it's a big area and there's only me.

The research suggests that these formal and informal partnerships, networks and inter-dependencies are shaping how the Forest is organisationally configured.

The active Forest

Research also revealed a number of ways in which the Forest itself figures as an active element of the networks, associations and groupings that are emerging as the result of different projects and initiatives. This substantiates Gibson's pioneering work on perception within the field of ecological psychology.¹⁴ *Growing places* points to some qualities of the Forest, or what Gibson would have referred to as the Forest's 'affordances', and to some of the effects these qualities might be having upon different groups and individuals. Of particular interest is the way in which group activities in particular places provide the setting for discussions about appropriate behaviour or the moral conduct of people who live in, work in or visit the area. These discussions are often contextualised by activities such as walking, volunteering and tree-planting, and tend to revolve around subjects such as access, vandalism and other forms of anti-social behaviour on Forest sites. The following points were made in these discussions:

It's nice to see people walking footpaths properly because we [farmers] create the landscape... and it's nice to see people enjoying it...it's rewarding to see people appreciate what we've done... it's the people who don't respect the countryside that we don't want.

Tender Scheme winner

Seeing these trees they've planted restores my faith in humanity... it's amazing that people can be so selfless as to plant a tree that is clearly for future generations.

Walker

It's these bloody kids... they've got no respect... they've got this beautiful place to use and all they want to do is destroy it.

Volunteer

¹⁴ For Gibson, perception is a mode of action involving the ceaseless performance of connections between a being and the world around it, and informing the fine-tuning of mental and physical responses to salient aspects of the environment, which he refers to as nature's 'affordances' (Gibson, 1979: 127–143). The theme of nature's affordances has since been taken up by a number of commentators (Ingold, 2000; Macnaghten and Urry, 2001a; Morris, 2004) all of whom ascribe a kind of 'agency' to the non-human in shaping human beings' mental representations of, and physical responses to, the world around them.

This suggests that specific forms of social interaction *within* places, and physical interaction *with* places, might be crystallising a sense of care for the environment that feeds into negotiations of a normative code that, in turn, governs the behaviour of forest users. It also suggests, crucially, that these communicative processes involve non-human as well as human participants – discussions may be taking their lead from changes to the physical environment. In this sense, the Forest is not only bringing about changes to the area's landscape but also to its 'valuescape'.

Figure 13 Tender Scheme winners in 2004–05 photographed at Staunton Harold.



Certain qualities of the Forest are also playing a role in changing social arrangements on those farms winning grants through the Tender Scheme (Figure 13). Overall it seems that the transformation of conventional, production-oriented farmland into forest brings dramatic changes to a farmer's outlook, particularly with respect to the issues of access and farm ecology. One farmer's wife, for example, provided a telling description of the way her husband's core values have changed since trees were planted on the farm:

He used to hate trees... he's a real conventional farmer at heart... you know, trees and hedgerows meant things that got in the way of machinery, something that got in the way of the combine... or a tree in the middle of a field was something that birds would roost in, dropping seeds and causing weeds. And he used to be a terrible one for spraying... Chemical Ali we call him! Now the trees are here he loves them... I can see him getting really used to tinkering about amongst the trees, doing a bit of pruning and mowing... looking after them, really.

Another farmer reflected on the way he has changed since his first successful application to the Tender Scheme:

I still look over hedges at other farmer's crops, but just out of interest, you know... I was really proud of my fields, but I've no regrets... I just think of all that bloody work, and for nothing! There's still a lot of work... formative pruning, thinning. But we know where the money's coming from now... we can plan... and I love all the wildlife that's coming onto the farm... and it's great that other people can come and have a walk about.

There also seem to be connections between changes to a farm's physical environment and changes in the dynamic relations between members of the farming family unit. The research indicates that the conversion of land to forestry may sometimes be accompanied by changes to conventional, patriarchal farming family structures (Bennett, 2001; Whatmore, 1991a, 1991b). On two of the farms where fieldwork was conducted, the difficult decision to shift away from conventional farming practices, to diversify the farm business and to radically alter the farm environment, involved a collective decision between farmer and wife which then set the tone for ongoing farm management. In the words of one farmer's wife:

It was me that pushed him into it... I've always been a bit of a green, you know... I'm fascinated by hedges... what's in them... insects and birds. I couldn't see the point of producing all that stuff that nobody wants, and putting all those chemicals into the land... that wasn't good for anybody.

Another farmer explained:

My wife always said 'marry me, marry my horses'... and now the farm is perfect for her and we've got a great little business that's a real partnership for us. And our daughter works here, too.

The connected Forest

The research suggests that the range of social interactions, networks and partnerships coalescing around forest-related activities represents one of the most significant impacts of The National Forest. In other words, the Forest seems to be at least partly responsible for the emergence of new forms of social capital.¹⁵ This is not to suggest that levels of social connectedness are necessarily higher now than in the past. Some respondents, particularly those from the central coalfield area, told of a way of life defined by a strong sense of community (see Dennis *et al.*, 1969 on *Coal is our life*):

...nowadays the men meet in town and reminisce... go over past times... 'do you remember when?', they say... people round here really talk and they really listen. You needed your friends down the pit, for your own safety. And the women needed a support network to share the pressure of husbands' dangerous lives and to pick up the pieces when things went wrong. Swadlincote is such a sociable place... always has been.

Local resident

When the mines were here the landlords provided everything... galas, the miners' welfare etc etc... people didn't have to organise things for themselves... the mines used to provide a real community.

Local government employee

Our point here is not that social capital is being created from nothing but that it is being reconfigured in interesting new ways. Old networks and associations are being transformed or replaced by new forms of connectedness emerging in response to different opportunities and constraints presented by the growing and expanding Forest. For example, the Ashby Canal Restoration Project, which involves a wide range of partner organisations, groups and individuals, has benefited from a close association with The National Forest (Figure 14). This reconfiguration of social capital represents one of the most significant elements of the Forest's development.

¹⁵ Social capital theorists, most notably Robert Putnam, use the concept of social capital to explore the idea that social networks have value, just as economic capital has value. Putnam defines social capital as: '*the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them*' (2000: 19). In his famous *Bowling alone* publication, Putnam tracks the steady decline of 'connectedness' in the United States since the 1960s, and argues that many of the problems facing modern American society might be overcome if this negative trend could be reversed. To bolster his arguments, and to demonstrate the advantages of a connected society, he uses a wide range of statistical data from different states to demonstrate a positive correlation between high incidences of social capital and positive child development, safe, productive neighbourhoods, economic prosperity, good mental and physical health, and strong democratic processes. A similar argument, specifically related to the effects of social capital in providing protection for older people from dying of intense heat, is to be found in Klinenberg (2003).

Figure 14 Ashby Canal Festival – an annual community event run by Ashby Canal Restoration Project.



One example was provided by a respondent's account of his company's involvement with the Forest. Employees of the company in question are concerned about the environmental impacts of their business activities. Looking at factors such as the daily commute to work, business travel, energy use at the office and waste, the team were able to calculate their annual carbon emissions. They devised a number of initiatives to reduce or offset these emissions, including a green commuter competition, an office bike scheme and tree planting. In March 2005 a group of these employees attended a corporate tree-planting day, organised by the NFC, where they planted 50 trees. One tangible 'product' of the team's activities, therefore, was a stand of 50 saplings in the Forest. During his account the respondent also talked about other less tangible, but nonetheless valuable 'products': in order to organise these initiatives, the team has formed an Environment Committee that meets every month and assigns tasks to ensure that progress is made. Every employee in the company regularly expresses support for the initiatives put forward by the committee, and the vast majority are actively involved. There has been a marked change in employee outlooks and practices, most evident in changing views about the environment and travel, with a marked increase in the number of employees who regularly lift-share and cycle to work. There is a better atmosphere in the workplace and people are said to be happier and healthier. The winner of the green commuter competition was reported to have been overwhelmed by the day they spent planting trees:

He was just so happy to be doing something that was completely different from what he would ordinarily be doing... sitting at his computer. He kept saying afterwards how amazing it was to be out and about and doing some good for the environment.

Company employee

Accessing The National Forest



Each new addition to the total forested area within the designation means another place open to public access. This increasing supply of access, together with changing attitudes and relations between 'users' and 'providers', soon emerged as one of the most significant social impacts of the Forest. This research has shown how the different ways in which the Forest is accessed reveals its 'mobility'. There are three important forms of access: physical, visual and mental, which will now be considered.

Figure 15 Horseriding at Grangewood.



Physical access

Physical access to planted sites (Figure 15) provides an interesting example of the 'complex relationality' that, according to Sheller and Urry (2006), defines people's interactions with places.¹⁶ The research indicates, furthermore, that incorporated into this complex picture of the relationship between 'accessers' and 'places access-ed', are the changing relations between different individuals and groups as a result of increased levels and forms of access. This is most neatly illustrated by evidence of an ongoing renegotiation of the relationship between Tender Scheme winning farmers and the wider public, driven by changes to the nature of access to their farms.

The provision of access to planted sites is actively encouraged under the NFC's Tender Scheme. All the farmers interviewed initially struggled with the idea of allowing people onto their farm:

People on the farm usually spells trouble... they don't stick to paths and they trample crops. My brother couldn't understand how I could put up with having all those people roaming all over the place...

Tender Scheme winner

¹⁶ In their elaboration of the 'New Mobilities Paradigm', Sheller and Urry (2006) call for a revision to the conventional ontology which distinguishes between static 'places' and mobile 'people' who travel to, visit, or access them. They argue, rather, that there is a 'complex relationality' between places and people. Places do not merely provide an inert setting for human activities, but are themselves implicated in these activities. Therefore, as people move around experiencing, touching, changing, sensing, taking, collecting, sharing, remembering and imagining, places 'move around' with them.

The interviews showed, however, that the decision to put a bid into the Tender Scheme not only required a thorough re-thinking of a farmer's attitudes to public access but often meant the incorporation of access as a central element of a new plan for a diversified farm aimed at bringing customers directly to the farm gate. In other words, the decision to 'go into forestry' often entails a switch from thinking about people as a nuisance to thinking about people as potentially valuable customers:

People will come here, go for a nice walk in the forest, and then come and spend some money in the farm shop.

We're going to farm people now!

Tender Scheme winner

Furthermore, it seems likely that this change in attitudes cuts both ways. The research findings suggest that the provision of access is leading to changes in people's attitudes towards farmers. The following excerpt from a conversation between a farmer and a walker indicates that, for many people, the transformation of an exclusive farming culture into a more inclusive one represents a very welcome change:

'Are you the farmer?'

'I used to be, but I got better!'

'Well, this place is a credit to you... thank you!'

There was some evidence, as might be expected, that this renegotiated relationship can turn sour. One farmer, for example, explained that while most people he meets walking on the farm are friendly, polite and supportive, a few can be less so:

...one idiot who asked me when I was going to get off my tractor and clear this bloody dog shit up... I counted to ten and then explained that I was the farmer and that he was only allowed to be there with my permission... I'm not some bloody warden!

Another feature of physical access, and one with a particular bearing on the Forest's mobility, is how the embodied experiences of forested areas can occur *ex-situ*.¹⁷ Our research in the Forest suggests that the range or 'reach' of forest affordances is not limited to the confines of forested areas, but may also affect embodied experiences within other, unforested locations. One example of this was provided by our observations of primary school children involved in class sessions organised by the Children's Music Workshop (Figure 16). The main purpose of these classes was for the children to practice singing songs they had

Figure 16 Children performing at Lichfield Cathedral as part of the Children's Music Workshop.



¹⁷ In 'Bodies in the woods', Macnaghten and Urry (2001a) draw on evidence from focus group discussions to illustrate how experiences of woodlands, trees and forests are characterised by an interplay between various bodily activities and the affordances of such places and features. In other words, they focus on corporeal experiences within, and shaped by, specific forested locations.

composed during days spent in forests and woodlands near the school¹⁸. In addition they also performed a range of physical exercises and activities designed to re-connect them with the inspiration they had felt on these days – in other words, to re-connect them with the Forest’s affordances. Observations of these bodily performances, and the clear signs that the children were inspired anew by re-enactments of past experiences, suggested that the boundary between classroom and forest was dissolving. The children’s activities occupied a liminal space where, for children, teachers and audience, distinctions between their present physical position (classroom, auditorium) and forest spaces are less clear-cut. This is a powerful example of the way in which physical access to forest sites enables subsequent multiple instances of access from other places, showing how forest spaces can extend beyond the specific confines of planted sites.

Visual access

The Forest is starting to have a significant *visual* impact on the landscape; indeed visual access towards, through and away from forested areas emerged as an important issue for many respondents. The importance of visual access is recognised by the NFC who prioritise land where tree planting will have the maximum visual impact (Figure 17). Sites with road frontage, for example, are highly prized. Correspondingly, people base their judgement of how well the overall project is progressing upon the landscape changes that they encounter as they move around. Seeing trees and signs of planting activities while driving is particularly significant for many respondents, for example:

As you’re coming in on the B5003 you can really see the trees now.

Local resident

Figure 17 A mixture of planting, waterways and open spaces at Sence Valley Forest Park.



¹⁸ Children’s Music Workshop has been working within the Forest for three years, making partnerships with resident organisations and reaching 30 primary schools to hold song-writing workshops, teachers’ workshops and site-specific events, such as a *Marriage of Figaro* project at Calke Abbey and *Midsummer night’s dream* at Conkers. In 2005 nine schools worked on a newly commissioned work *Songs of the forest* by Howard Moody, artistic director of the programme, for performances at Burton Town Hall and Lichfield Cathedral. This work set to music texts about forests by authors from Shakespeare, Erasmus Darwin and Needwood poet Francis Mundy to Edward Lear, Siegfried Sassoon and local children themselves. More information can be found at: www.nationalforest.org/fscene/w2003/formusic.html

An appreciation of the importance of visual access to planted sites must be balanced, however, by the recognition that many people in The National Forest also value being able to see *through* and *beyond* the trees. The examples of the Staunton Harold parishioners and the farm neighbour who worried about being ‘walled in’ by trees (discussed on page 22) are representative of other respondents keen that existing views and vistas are maintained. To a large extent, this has been taken on board by the NFC, who are supportive of planting site designs that incorporate open spaces and rides. These examples, however, stress the importance of not only continuing with this sensitive approach to planting site design, but also of broadening the design focus so that changes to the wider landscape can accommodate as wide a range of access needs as possible.¹⁹

Mental access

A significant part of the research involved spending time with respondents in and moving around forest sites. Some interviews and observations, however, were conducted away from these sites, in less specified locations such as a respondent’s home or workplace. Here the focus of research moved away from physical and visual forms of access, concentrating instead on the different ways in which the Forest is accessed *mentally*. All these respondents were readily able to access the Forest in this way, albeit that mental access typically drew on memories of past instances of physical or visual access. For many, indeed, it is the knowledge that the Forest exists and that there is, therefore, the opportunity for future physical and visual access that figures as the dominant feature of mental access to different places:

There are all those lovely places right on our doorstep now... it’s like it’s beckoning you to get out and about locally, rather than going further afield like we used to. We almost have a duty to use them, I’d say.

Local resident

Mental access to The National Forest often seems to involve acts of remembering the area’s industrial past, and imagining a future or ‘potential’ landscape that is suggested by young trees and newly planted sites (Figure 18).

Figure 18 New tree planting near Drakelow power station. The power station has been demolished since this photograph was taken.



¹⁹ The NFC is in the process of developing ‘landscape visualisation’ capabilities on its Geographic Information System. This will extend the focus of design activities beyond planting sites to help identify areas still suitable for new planting and those areas which may already have enough trees.

In other words, mental access often takes place by invoking past and future landscapes, with these invocations informing people's experiences of the present landscape. As such, mental access to The National Forest is often comparative in nature, displaying a complex, non-linear temporality, with past and future collapsing into experiences of the present. A song composed in a classroom at one of the schools involved in the Children's Music Workshop provides a telling illustration of this.

Song

Created in 2004 by children in Year 5 at Broom Leys School, Coalville, during work with the Children's Music Workshop.

Danger!! Danger!!

*Danger! Danger! Poisonous gas!
Tunnels twist and turn.
Claustrophobic, cold and damp,
Rubble falling down the shaft.
Dust is spreading, dust is spreading;
Coughing, choking,
Cannot breathe.
Scared of going deeper and deeper.
My legs give way,
Blood rushes to my brain.
My heart is beating, beating, beating like a drum.
My arms are weak like tissue paper.
I can't believe I'm doing this.*

*I drench my clothes.
Nervously I crawl towards the gas.
Protect my face, my face, my face with fears.
I stretch my hands out into darkness.
I can't believe I'm doing this.*

*A shaft of light squirms through smoky,
spluttering soot-filled air.
Showered by sparkling green.
Blinded by shimmering light;
Beautiful summer's day!
What a relief!
Forest trees with yellow leaves,
Squirrels,
Whispering trees,
Spiralling spider webs,
Crying trees.*



Mental access, as the words in the song suggest, not only involves acts of remembering and imagining, but also entails vicarious experiences of place through the experiences of past and future generations. Older respondents for whom the memories of the area's mining history are still very much alive, and for whom the area's future holds new and exciting opportunities, highlighted this point:

My grandson loves Rosliston and Conkers... he likes to peep over the tree guards and see how they're getting on. He doesn't know about anything to do with his grandfather's work and the history of the area and what those miners went through.

Local resident

These vicarious experiences of the present through the future and past are often filled with mixed emotions. Comparisons with the past, for example, are often tinged with relief, but also regret:

They wouldn't go back to it, but many felt resentment when the pits began to be all covered over with trees, especially as many know that there is a lot of coal still down there.

Local resident

Comparisons with the future tend to involve a mixture of excitement and anticipation, but also nostalgia and sadness:

Mining is still a part of us... we'll never lose it. It's great that the Forest is bringing so many improvements to the area, but sometimes I wonder whether the trees will replace that for the young people.

Local resident

Mental access to The National Forest, then, tends to revolve around the appreciation of a physical and social space in transition and, as such, emerges as an important feature of the Forest's mobility – in this case, a temporal mobility. This mobility, however, does not represent an uncontrolled acceleration towards future landscapes and lifestyles, but exhibits a clear provenance; it is anchored in the memories of its people and the historical features of the landscape. This 'controlled mobility', furthermore, is being carefully monitored and engineered through the activities of the NFC and their many partners who, at the same time as pioneering a better future for the area through processes of landscape change, are also making significant efforts to support activities that preserve the area's heritage and history.²⁰

²⁰ There are numerous examples of the NFC's involvement in heritage conservation projects. Most recently, the NFC has launched 'LANDshapes', a heritage project working with local people to gather together information about the heritage of The National Forest. A central feature of the project is the creation of an open-source archive of knowledge and memories about the area. For more information, go to: www.landshapes.org

The political economy of The National Forest



While it is problematic to try to establish a simple causal link between landscape change as the result of National Forest initiatives and socio-political or economic changes currently taking place in the area, evidence from qualitative interviews with a wide range of respondents does point to current and potential opportunities for economic and social development provided by the Forest.

In their appraisal of the socio-economic impacts of The National Forest, the authors of the report *Much more than trees 2* stress that: 'the activity of the NFC is only one amongst a number of factors that potentially influence the economic environment within the Forest area'. Such 'factors' include: 'national patterns of migration, the impact of other policy initiatives in the former coalfield areas, the effects of foot-and-mouth disease on the visitor economy, trends in inward investment and the general health of the national economy'. The authors go on to discuss various limitations of the data used, which were primarily collated from secondary sources such as local authority housing and economic development departments and the NFC itself, and which were mostly intended for other purposes. Thus it is difficult to isolate the precise effects that landscape change in the Forest is having on the regional economy, based on the data sets available. In recognising these limitations, Ball also presents the results of a survey and interviews conducted with 'key decision makers and influencers' (local authority and inward investment agency chief executives), which are used to substantiate the findings of other research activities. The results provide an 'attitudinal perspective', presenting respondents views 'on the achievements of the National Forest initiative, its future effects, and the necessary actions to create a sustainable impact'. This current publication aims to supplement the evidence provided by key players and documented in *Much more than trees 2* with data collected during qualitative interviews with a wider range of respondents. It is hoped that these data will build on the tentative link between environmental and socio-economic change in The National Forest made by the Staffordshire University study (Ball *et al.*, 2004: 10–12).

A common vision

Despite the caveats discussed above, the results of interviews and surveys conducted for the *Much more than trees 2* study do point to some 'widely recognised early effects, and positive expectations'. Amongst the most significant of these is the way in which the Forest is providing a strategic focus for the economic development of the area. One respondent, for example, is cited as saying that The National Forest offers: 'a unifying vision for what the area could become' (Ball *et al.*, 2004: 51). Respondents interviewed for *Growing places* corroborate this finding, giving accounts of the various ways in which the Forest is channelling the political and economic activities of a wide range of individuals and organisations, and providing a cohesive structure for economic and social development. This is particularly the case with the regeneration work of local authorities, regional development agencies and their sub-regional strategic partnerships.

Working together is the new challenge. Jurisdictional boundaries are a bit irrelevant now The National Forest is here... East Staffs [District Council], South-Derbyshire [District Council], and North-West Leicestershire [District Council]... we're all thinking of ways we can help each other out. That's a real opportunity for The National Forest.

Local government employee

The impact (both current and potential) of the Forest on regional political structures is mirrored by an emerging cross-regional strategy for tourism. For example, North-West Leicestershire Promotions, one of the Destination Management Organisations responsible for promoting tourism in Leicestershire, is currently encouraging the use of the Forest as a 'distinctive visitor story and a cohesive strategy that will link all the tourism attractions and tourism providers in North-West Leicestershire and beyond' (see Figure 19). Similarly, tourism providers themselves are not only using their location within The National Forest to attract consumers of their own products and services, but see the clear benefits of cross-selling to other providers in the area. In these ways, it seems that the Forest may be encouraging partnerships amongst service providers who once saw one another as competitors:

We always leave leaflets and brochures for other attractions for the visitors to look at. And when we're full I always recommend other places in the area. That way they're more likely to come back to the area... I don't like just sending people away.

Tourism provider

Figure 19 'Heart of the Forest' bus tour linking the main attractions in North-West Leicestershire.



Attracting investment

Much more than trees 2 cites the attraction of inward investment to the area as a further important economic impact of the Forest. Interviews with key players point to 'regeneration spin-offs' and the Forest's influence as a 'catalyst for levering in external funding' (Ball *et al.*, 2004: 52). Again, these findings are corroborated by our research. In particular, respondents from local authorities and regional development agencies attributed some of their success in attracting central government funding for development and regeneration work to their location within the Forest. Others highlighted the role played by The National Forest in attracting business investment and relocations to the area:

Toyota has made huge investments in Derbyshire because they could see the quality of the environment, and The National Forest has had a role to play there. Other smaller businesses are moving to the area because they can see it's a nice place to work and live... they can see the benefits for their employees.

Local government employee

A brighter future for farming?

Much more than trees 2 also states that the Forest is having a positive impact on the agricultural economy of the area:

National Forest Company actions are, it is argued, supporting the viability of the agricultural base within the Forest area, or alternatively easing the diversification route... The Tender Scheme has enabled farm businesses to plant up and retain land, freeing up capital value for reinvestment or supporting diversification schemes.

Ball et al., 2004: 52

Our research uncovered further evidence to support these findings. First, it seems likely that diversified farms will mean an increase in employment opportunities over conventional farms:

When we've got the farm shop up and running... in the summer we'll need three or four extra people when we're busy.

Tender Scheme winner

Figure 20 Diversified farm business – a fishing lake at Beehive Farm.



Second, diversified farm businesses (Figure 20) may require support from a greater number and diversity of associated industries than was the case with conventional farms:

You would have thought that diversifying would mean the chop for many of the support industries, but we still need pest control, certification for the kitchen, fly zappers, and a huge range of equipment that needs updating and servicing. I reckon we create more business locally than we used to.

Tender Scheme winner

Third, the conversion of farm buildings into property for commercial let has provided a much-needed supply of suitable premises in some areas where strict planning controls have made it increasingly difficult for businesses to relocate or expand:

The problem here is that there's no land... no premises, so it's difficult for new companies to move in. There's a 'Full' sign on Ashby due to planning restrictions... nowhere for any businesses to go, especially due to the lack of 'starter units'. Farm building conversions have been a real saviour.

Local government employee

Working together

In addition to the impacts on the area's economic development, the research points to important non-financial 'spin-offs' resulting from the activities outlined above. It is clear that economic and political partnerships are being strengthened because many people now recognise the Forest as a resource whose value can be maximised through collaboration, and the resulting social capital is emerging as an important feature of the area's changing political economy. The examples of cross-selling tourism providers and local authorities working together are neat illustrations of this. The NFC, furthermore, is a strong exponent of these forms of social capital and of the spirit of open, generalised reciprocity that characterises these arrangements.²¹ For example, the NFC has created a 'Tender Scheme Winners' Club', whose members meet regularly to discuss problems and opportunities, and to offer advice to other farmers thinking about joining the scheme. Similarly, the NFC tourism officer regularly organises meetings for tourism providers where they have the chance to share experiences and tips, and also arranges familiarisation visits, popularly known as 'fam visits' (Figure 21) for providers to familiarise themselves with other attractions and services available to visitors. In the words of one bed and breakfast provider:

The 'fam visits' are great. I've got to know other people and seen what's on offer round here... now I feel part of The National Forest community.

Accurate measurements of the benefits of enhanced social capital, whether financial or other, are difficult to make. However, that benefits do accrue to individuals, organisations and institutions that are connected in the ways outlined above seems highly probable. Putnam (2000) even suggests that co-operation between economic actors might be a better engine for growth than free market competition – a hypothesis borne out by developments in the tourism industry in the Forest. In general terms, it seems likely that new forms of connectedness and emerging networks of mutual benefit represent one of the most significant features of the Forest's changing political economy.

Figure 21 A 'fam visit' to Ashby Castle.



²¹ Putnam argues that social capital is produced within 'specific', or 'generalised' systems of reciprocity. Generalised reciprocity holds the greatest value: 'Sometimes... reciprocity is *specific*: I'll do this for you if you do that for me. Even more valuable, however, is a norm of *generalised* reciprocity: I'll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road' (Putnam, 2000:20-21, emphasis in original).

PART 3

Conclusions and future research



Conclusions

At the early planning stage it was hoped that this research might reveal ways in which this innovative and progressive model of social forestry is resulting, not only in the growth of trees, but also in the growth of communities. In particular, the research would focus on the interplay between landscape change and changing practices, relationships and identities, and, through descriptions of this interplay, would further an understanding of the linkages between the physical and social environments in The National Forest. By looking in some detail at the ways in which forested places are being used as 'engines' for sustainable development, it was hoped that this publication would not only flag up some key issues for future research, but would also provide a useful and up-to-date perspective on the progress of the Forest project. These objectives have been met through the analysis and description of key features of what we term its 'mobility'.

This publication shows how people associate the Forest with improving environmental and economic conditions. These positive perceptions of place feed into a growing trust and support for the 'institutional' Forest (NFC and partner organisations), a willingness to be associated with The National Forest brand, and an optimistic, forward-looking vision for the area. *Growing places*, then, has uncovered evidence of emergent National Forest identities that are based on these positive meanings and values. Continuing to facilitate and support these processes of identity formation represents a real opportunity for future NFC work.

This publication argues that social interactions shape experiences of the Forest. There is strong evidence of linkages between landscape change and a developing Forest sociality, with forested places providing the setting for the reconfiguration of social capital. Furthermore, it seems that forested places are themselves playing a part in these processes of reconfiguration, both by affording opportunities for new forms of connectedness, and by influencing negotiations of the Forest valuescape. There are indications at this stage, that not only trees, but also communities are growing in the Forest, representing a significant achievement.

An understanding of the complex relationship between the changing physical and social environments is enhanced through analyses and descriptions of physical, visual and mental access to The National Forest. The publication shows how the relationships between people and between people and the Forest are changing as new opportunities for access emerge and develop. Of particular interest is the way in which mental access points to the controlled temporal mobility of the Forest, with the implication that the NFC's careful balancing of a forward-looking vision with efforts to preserve the area's heritage and history is broadly working.

Growing places also highlights linkages between the Forest and the area's changing political economy, adding descriptive and analytical weight to the findings of the Staffordshire University study (Ball *et al.*, 2004). Of particular value is the analysis of The National Forest as a catalyst for the production of social capital within networks of co-operation between economic and political actors. Some of these networks display a spirit of open, generalised reciprocity, and appear to be bringing substantial benefits to their participants. These new forms of connectedness, whether they are the direct or indirect results of NFC actions, represent a further significant achievement.

Recommendations for future research

Growing places addresses the long-term interests of the partners. The study has not only thrown up some important and interesting issues that warrant further research, but has also enabled the identification of key areas of land management, regeneration and conservation policy to which further analysis of The National Forest project would be highly relevant.

The research has revealed that it is the social interactions between individuals and organisations, and within groups, that structure and organise people's experiences. This publication therefore suggests that the Forest is providing a setting for the reconfiguration of social capital – little evidence of 'bowling alone' was found (Putnam, 2000). We suggest that the Forest's role in the reconfiguration of social capital should be factored into measurements of the social sustainability of the overall project. Future research should provide a more detailed examination of what it is about changes in the physical environment that seem to produce enhanced social capital. The study has also shown that the Forest itself is strongly implicated in the production of this social capital, calling for much-needed revisions to current theoretical frameworks that treat economic, physical and social capital as separate. Research that enables the development of revisionist evaluative frameworks that can accommodate the complex interplay between economic, physical and social capital should be a high priority.

Our findings indicate, furthermore, that the NFC is fast becoming a leading entity in developing revisionist approaches to conservation. This is occurring through a number of schemes and initiatives where the production of social capital, and the involvement of local organisations and networks, is producing exciting alternatives to conventional, top-down approaches to natural resource and heritage conservation. Conservation, it seems, is being '*de-colonised*' in The National Forest (Adams and Mulligan, 2002). Future research should explore whether this process of decolonisation is being accelerated by high incidences of social capital, allowing the creation and conservation of 'new nature' and 'new heritage'.

The study has also shown that social values and normative codes seem to be being renegotiated with the development of the Forest. Future research should provide a more thorough-going analysis of the links between developing environmental sensibilities as the result of landscape change and developing views about the appropriate conduct of people who live in, work in, or visit the area.

Future research should also examine the issue of access in more depth. Particular emphasis should be given to an examination of the differing importance of the three 'modes of access' (physical, visual and mental) for various social groups living in, working in or visiting the Forest. This will further understanding of how access varies in terms of income, access to transport, gender, ethnicity, age and location, and how gains and losses in the availability of access impinge upon the changing and complex relationships that exist between people and between people and places. Future research should also explore further the various forms of *ex-situ* physical and mental access to forested sites described in this publication. This might lead to the production of 'experiential maps' of access, depicting not only the location and extent of forested sites, but also the location, extent, character and intensity of people's access to them. By mapping different forms of *in-situ* and *ex-situ* access, researchers would be able to provide spatially referenced analyses of the Forest's mobility.

Growing places has revealed the complex temporality of experiences. Experiences of the present, it seems, are simultaneously informed by a remembered past *and* an imagined future – they are both nostalgic and forward-looking. Furthermore, although relatively new, the NFC and the Forest are already seen as permanent and enduring features of the landscape. This quality has influenced business- and policy-related decision-making processes by engendering a sense of long-term trust. Future research should examine in more detail the ways in which people are identifying with the physical and institutional Forests, focusing in particular on the symbolism of trees, forested places, heritage sites and the NFC, and how this symbolism is being used, developed and interpreted as the Forest continues to grow. This research would be relevant to debates surrounding nature and heritage conservation and land regeneration policy in the UK and elsewhere.

Growing places reveals that the Forest is making significant, non-financial contributions to the regional economy. Future research should give particular emphasis to the ways in which the Forest's positive social, environmental and ethical associations deliver various direct and indirect benefits to individuals and organisations who get involved with forest-related activities and initiatives. Such associations include improved employee morale, a more positive outlook on life, and other mental and physical health benefits. Ongoing research should enable the analysis and development of a range of qualitative processes that could be factored into assessments of sustainable development. These will include the extent and quality of social interaction, measurements of physical and mental health, facilities for physical, mental and visual access, and assessments of capacity building at the local level.

**Thus we might say that individuals, communities and trees
all seem to be growing down in the Forest.**



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Research respondents, research activities and events

Interviewees and contributors

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Stuart Bachelor	South Derbyshire District Council
Heather Bell	North-West Leicestershire District Council
Wendy Jones	North-West Leicestershire District Council
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Keith Maberey	Ashby Wolds Regeneration Forum
Graham Knight	Moira REPLAN
Jane Pountney	Children's Music Workshop
Maria Banks	Children's Music Workshop
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Stephen Holdsworth	Forestry Commission
Susan Taylor	Forestry Commission
Richard Hayden	Forestry Commission
Gareth Hopkins	Forestry Commission
Grace Allen	Ibstock and District Walkers Club
David Luther	Leicestershire County Council Country Parks Service
Andrew Kirkland	Tender Scheme winner

Alan, Cathy and James Ludlam	Tender Scheme winners
Alistair Chapman	Tender Scheme winner
Monica Hudson	South Derbyshire Mining Preservation Group
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Paul Kennedy	Staffordshire County Council
Helen Bishop	Rolls-Royce
Lesley Norminton	Rolls-Royce
Julie Oldroyd	Rolls-Royce
Isabel and Maurice Stanley	Tender Scheme winners / tourism providers
Lusale Silwamba	Esit

Participating groups

Sence Valley Volunteer Group
British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (Tuesday group)
Ibstock and District Walkers Club
'Walking the Way to Health' – Prestwood Surgery group
'Tree for All' tree planters – Linton Primary School
Ashby Wolds Regeneration Forum
'Time Frame' competitors
Tree planters – Community Tree Planting Day (Staunton Harold, 5 Mar 2005)

Research activities and events

6th Millionth Tree Planting Event (Ashby de la Zouch, 31 Jan 2005)

Volunteer work – British Trust for Conservation Volunteers

Volunteer work – Sence Valley Volunteer Group task day

School tree planting day at Cattows Farm

'Walking the Way to Health' walks in Swadlincote

Farm work

Farm visits

'Tree For All' project meeting

'Tree for All' planting days

Heather Parish Plan meeting

Children's Music Workshop

Meeting of Ashby Woulds Regeneration Forum

Competitor training day – 'Time Frame' (LANDshapes photography competition)

Tender Scheme winning farm visits

Community Tree Planting Day (Staunton Harold, 5 Mar 2005)

Walk Leader Training Day – 'Walking the Way to Health'

Meeting of Ashby Partnership

Tourism Forum meeting – North-West Leicestershire Promotions

Meeting of Ibstock and District Walkers Club

Further reading and information

The Social and Economic Research Group is part of the Environmental and Human Sciences Division of Forest Research. Other titles of interest produced by the Group include:

- **Trees are company: social science research into woodlands and the natural environment** (2002)
edited by Liz O'Brien and Jenny Claridge
- **Health and well-being: trees woodlands and natural spaces** (2003)
by Paul Tabbush and Liz O'Brien
- **A sort of magical place. People's experiences of woodlands in northwest and southeast England** (2004)
by Liz O'Brien
- **Involving people in forestry. A toolbox for public involvement in forest and woodland planning** (2004)
by Max Hislop, Mark Twery and Heini Vihemäki
- **Accessibility of woodlands and natural spaces. Addressing crime and safety issues** (2005)
by Liz O'Brien and Paul Tabbush
- **'Proving It!' Evidence gathering for forest managers** (2005)
by Suzanne Martin and Liz O'Brien
Forestry Commission Information Note 64
- **Public participation and partnership: a review of Forestry Commission practice and governance in a changing political and economic context** (2005)
by Sue Weldon in collaboration with Paul Tabbush
- **Leisure landscapes: understanding the role of forests and woodlands in the tourism sector. In: Forest Research Annual Report and Accounts 2003–04** (2005)
by Suzanne Martin
- **Consultation and community involvement in forest planning. Research in Cranborne Chase and North Dorset** (2005)
by Paul Tabbush
- **Woodland owners' attitudes to public access provision in south-east England** (2005)
by Andrew Church, Neil Ravenscroft and Gill Rogers of Brighton University; co-ordinated by Paul Tabbush
Forestry Commission Information Note 74
- **Trees and woodlands: Nature's health service** (2005)
by Liz O'Brien
- **Wild harvests from Scottish woodlands: Social, cultural and economic values of contemporary non-timber forest products** (2006)
by Marla Emery, Suzanne Martin and Alison Dyke
- **A marvellous opportunity for children to learn: a participatory evaluation of Forest School in England and Wales** (2006)
by Liz O'Brien and Richard Murray

For further information on the above titles: email research.info@forestry.gsi.gov.uk
website www.forestresearch.gov.uk/socialresearch



A selection of books produced by the Social and Economic Research Group of Forest Research.



