

From discord to accord: a decade's work building consensus on sustainable forest management

The recent release of the third edition of the United Kingdom Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) provides an opportunity to reflect on the development of sustainable forest management certification in the UK. The revised UKWAS standard has been endorsed by PEFC and FSC's approval is imminent. None of this seems very remarkable and it is certainly nothing very controversial receiving only scant mention in the trade media. And it is precisely the technical, rather than political, nature of today's UKWAS process that makes it interesting for it is a far cry from the highly charged atmosphere within which the first edition of the UKWAS standard was developed.

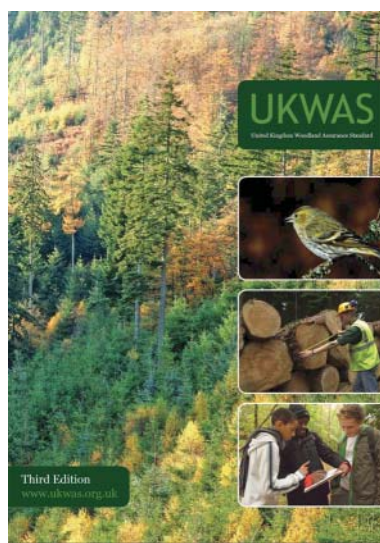
So, how was past discord transformed into the present day's accord?

In post-WW1 Britain, forest expansion had been identified as a strategic national priority. A heavy reliance on timber imports disrupted by wartime naval blockade had led to drastic measures being adopted to supply timber from homegrown sources. For a nation reliant on coal, wooden pit props were essential to the war effort and by 1918 little more than 5% of Britain remained as woodland. This prompted the establishment of a Forestry Commission, with a remit to establish a strategic timber reserve to guard against future crises, and encouragement for private land owners to undertake afforestation.

A second world war just over 20 years later saw further depletion of Britain's timber reserves and the new strategic reserve was of course too young to be of much help. Expansion resumed apace in the post-war years with great interest from private investors as well as the Forestry Commission.

By the 1970s and 1980s, however, the UK forestry sector found itself in the public spotlight for all the wrong reasons. Public concern, championed by NGOs and much reported in the media, centered primarily on the nature of this rapid expansion. On the face of it, expansion was of course a good thing but, if one chose to dig a little deeper, a multitude of conflicting objectives was revealed. The expansion was largely taking place on the land available at the time, mainly upland semi-natural habitats, whilst existing semi-natural woods were often modified into plantation-style woodlands. In both, there was a strong emphasis on commercial timber production hence the choice of high yielding, often exotic, species. Critics argued that this new style of forestry was compromising biodiversity and transforming cherished landscapes; many agreed and by the end of the 1980s, debate on forestry matters was characterized by polarity.

In the 1990s, much work was done to counter this polarity by building bridges and seeking consensus on a common agenda: in 1996, a UK Forestry Accord was agreed between business and environmental and social NGOs on a set of objectives and principles for responsible forestry; in 1998, European forestry ministers agreed pan-European operational level guidelines



for sustainable forest management and the UK Government launched its UK Forestry Standard setting out how to achieve sustainable forest management in practice.

This period also saw rising consumer concern about the environmental impacts of forest management across the world and a demand for assurance that timber products were sourced from well managed forests. There was much debate on how best to achieve this in the UK context. Initially there was considerable disagreement; some advocated reliance on the governmental controls already in place and others championed a new process known as forest certification involving independent verification against a published certification standard defining sustainable forest management.

The debate was heated and highly charged but, in time, the UK's forestry, environmental and social communities chose to work together to develop an independent 'audit protocol' or certification standard. The Forestry Commission played an invaluable role as a facilitator and the stakeholders agreed that ownership of any certification standard must rest with the stakeholders and that all decisions must be based on consensus. The concept developed was for an independent certification standard for use in others' certification programmes. In 1997 work began to develop a standard that would reflect the requirements of the governmental UK Forestry Standard and through this the guidelines adopted by European Forestry Ministers. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in the UK had already started developing a certification standard and this work informed the development of the independent standard so that it would be conformant with FSC's principles and criteria for forest stewardship. The UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) was finally agreed, approved by FSC as conformant with its principles and criteria and launched in 1999.

The launch of the UKWAS was a landmark event for UK forestry and cemented a strong partnership between the organizations and individuals involved. Rather than work within the constraints of a single certification scheme, the UK's forestry sector and its stakeholders had chosen to develop and publish an independent certification standard as the best way to define appropriate and effective woodland management in the UK context. Agreement was achieved through a sense of common purpose and the sheer hard work of those involved and it put the UK at the forefront of the global certification movement.

In addition to the FSC's approval, the UKWAS was endorsed by PEFC in 2002 so allowing UK woodlands to be dual-certified to the two leading global certification schemes. This is a testament to the vision underpinning the unique UKWAS approach in which a single national standard can form the central component of several certification schemes. The working relationships between the UKWAS steering group and FSC UK and PEFC UK are set out in concordats clarifying each party's role and responsibilities.

These two leading global schemes provide a way for the UK forestry sector to assure buyers and users that its wood and wood products come from sustainably managed woodlands whilst providing enterprises with the maximum possible flexibility to meet their customers' needs at least cost. The latest figures show that 50% of the UK's woodland area and an estimated 85% of harvested timber is certified through one or both of these schemes. Certification is now an established part of the UK forestry scene and contributes to raising the standards of woodland management.

This success is a testament to what hard work, partnership working and good will can do to overcome polarity. Another

is that the UKWAS model continues to attract international interest; in recent years we have welcomed international visitors, including from China, wishing to learn whether our experience might be helpful to them in formulating their own national processes.

Peter Wilson FICFor
*Executive Chair, UK Woodland
Assurance Standard*

