

# Recreational value of Irish forests

- The development of forests for recreation is seen as an important aspect of sustainable forestry due to increasing demands for access to forest-related recreational activities, and a developing recognition of the wide ranging benefits they can provide to society. The EU Forest Action Plan (2006) acknowledges the multifunctional role of forests. This includes their social and cultural values - *‘attractive to city dwellers, they provide opportunities for recreational and healthy activities and represent a not inconsiderable cultural heritage’*.
- The value of forests for recreational activities has been recognised for many years in mainland Europe with its rich heritage of forests and woodlands. The growth in land areas in Ireland under forests from 1% at the beginning of the 20th century to the current c. 10% has provided Irish people and visitors with the opportunity to increasingly enjoy their use for recreation. Forests are the most important outdoor recreational facility in Ireland.
- While walking is the most popular activity, forest recreation embraces other specialised activities including orienteering, mountain biking, horse riding and fishing. Irish forests are well served with roads, tracks, rides, and increasingly with purpose built trail and cycle tracks in selected locations. Forest Service Guidelines provide direction on assessing the forests’ recreational potential.

The Dobris Assessment states that tourism is likely to become the largest single economic activity in the EU and currently accounts for 5.5% of the EU’s GNP. Land use for tourism has been correspondingly growing, with the more specialized forms of tourist activities, noted above, gaining in popularity.

- The utilization of forests for recreation is attested to in the total number of annual visits to western European forests. It is cited, for the mid 1990s, as being in the region of 1.4 billion – equivalent to an average of 6.5 visits per person per year. Fitzpatrick and Associates have estimated that the figure has more than doubled between 1998 and 2005, with 18 million people visiting Irish forests per annum, representing 4.5 visits per person. In the future it seems likely that demand will increase for a higher quality of forest recreation experience (e.g. more organised and specialised recreation activities and a higher expectation in relation to visitor facilities). As the Irish figure of visits per capita is less than the European average, it is likely that the expansion of public use of forests for recreation will continue for the next number of years.
- The main providers of access to lands in State ownership for recreation are Coillte, National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and Waterways Ireland. Coillte manages c.445, 000 hectares while NPWS manages 66,000 hectares in the National Parks. An audit by the National Waymarked Ways Advisory Committee of the Irish Sports Council identified that over 53% of all walking routes are on public roads while 55% of the remainder are on forest lands. The forest estate in Ireland is well distributed across the country and as such can provide recreational opportunities to an increasingly urbanised population.
- The monetary value of the recreational use of forests and trails has been examined in a number of recent studies. Fitzpatrick and Associates (2005) estimated that the annual 18 million visits to Irish forests provide a non-market value of €97 million or €5.40 per person. The total economic activity generated by domestic forest users is estimated at €268 million. Walking tourism generally by overseas visitors accounts for €138 million per annum. As a substantial number of trails commence or travel through forests, foreign visitors benefit significantly from the recreational facilities provided by Coillte. It has been demonstrated that the provision of nature reserves in Irish forests significantly increase the monetary returns from forest sites to the recreational users and enhances their willingness to pay for access.

- Research has shown that the value of trails is currently greater in Ireland for the domestic user than for overseas visitor. For both categories the demand for trails is likely to be greatest in urban areas and around existing popular tourist venues.
- Small-scale private forest holdings in Ireland are a relatively new phenomenon. They have expanded since 1973 with an estimated 17,000 holdings and an average size of 10.6 ha. A survey of forest owners gave timber production as the main objective for their forest but 42% included recreation as an objective.
- In forests used intensively for recreation, the forest manager has to take into account a range of extra issues in addition to timber management.

Irreversible change in rural Ireland and the extent to which the country is now urbanised will increase demand on forests and on the countryside for outdoor recreation.