

# NewStatesman

## How trees can help rebalance the economy

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In 1941 Piotr Sieminski, an escaped Polish prisoner of war, arrived at Liverpool Docks. In England, Sieminski, who would later change his name to Peter Skye, trained as a tank commander. After the war, he worked in a textile mill in Huddersfield.

Skye always remembered his home in Poland, a village with a forest nearby. When he retired, he donated money to plant two acres of trees at Scammonden Reservoir, close to the place he had made his home, on a landscape scarred by intensive farm use and pollution from the mills.

Today, those two acres are part of the UK's most ambitious forestry project: the creation of a Northern Forest between Liverpool and Hull. Its supporters believe it will create jobs, generate tourism and improve the environment.

Creating the Northern Forest will take an estimated 25 years and cost some £500m. The plan is to plant 50 million trees, hopefully generating £2.5bn in social and environmental benefits. The Woodland Trust calculated in 2017 that every hectare of woodland produces around £3,000 of direct economic benefits per year, from tourism and wood products such as timber. On top of these direct benefits are lower costs for the NHS, climate change mitigation, and reduced flood risk. At the end of last year, it was predicted flooding in northern England led to an estimated £120m in insurance losses.

"We need to think beyond physical infrastructure and see nature as a big part of the levelling up and devolution agenda", says Luke Murphy, head of the environmental justice commission at IPPR, a think tank. While some local leaders have embraced this vision, he says, others are yet to seize the opportunities provided by investment in nature.

The road to Scammonden Reservoir winds through the Colne Valley, which will also be part of the Northern Forest. The view is littered with large mill buildings, and on the outskirts of Huddersfield are rows of stone terraced houses. Guy Thompson, who has been working in community forestry for 30 years, explains that a local group called the Colne Valley Tree Society began planting trees across

the valley in 1964 to restore the local environment. Since then, they have planted hundreds of thousands.

Supported by Yorkshire Water, which owns most of the land, a large part of the reservoir has been planted in phases over 20 years as part of a partnership called the White Rose Forest. As the trees grew, so came the walkers. "People didn't come here before," Thompson says.

The National Forest, a forestry scheme started in the Midlands in 1995, has "delivered £140m of net public benefit", the Woodland Trust said in a 2017 report. It also generated 333 jobs in forestry, farming and woodland businesses. The Northern Forest aims to be more than five times larger than this.

John Healey, professor of forest sciences at Bangor University, believes the most significant economic impact of new forests could be in transforming construction, by providing timber to be used instead of carbon-intensive materials such as concrete and brick. This would reduce the need to import wood. "If we actually start to be clever in the engineering uses of timber... then this will make a major contribution to increasing the environmental efficiency of house building", he says.

At the moment, 10 per cent of England is forest. The area where the Northern Forest is planned represents less than 8 per cent. In France and Germany, around a third of land is covered in forest. This has yielded economic benefits. In 2018, forestry in the UK employed 32,000 people and generated around £2.5bn for the economy, according to the Forestry Commission. In Germany, by contrast, it employs 1.3 million people and brings in 170bn euros.

Still, covering 12 percent of England in forest is a "very ambitious target", says Gabriel Hemery of the Sylva Foundation. He points out that the UK lags behind in tree planting, with 13,400 hectares a year planted out of the target of 20,000 set by the Climate Change Committee. Hemery's organisation published a report in October that highlighted bureaucracy and a lack of funding as the barriers to creating more forests.

The Woodland Trust is working with community forestry projects in Manchester, Liverpool, Hull and Leeds. It is also providing funding for tree-planting by farmers and public and private landowners. Any landowner who participates in the schemes has to register the project with one of these community forests, so they can offer support with design, funding and delivery, and work with partners.

Planting trees also raises the value of nearby property by around 4 to 6 per cent, as an area becomes more desirable to live, work and invest in. Businesses near green space have happier and healthier workers, according to proponents of the project. Across the area of the Northern Forest, the plan is to build 650,000 homes over 20 years. Planting trees will increase the value of each home by an estimated £5,000, will mitigate the impact of flooding and provide the environment to attract developers, residents and businesses.

But this sounds like the old economics of house-price-led growth and consumption. As a Natural England report said in 2014, rising property prices transfer wealth from buyers to sellers and lead to poorer people being "priced out". Murphy points out that this is a challenge with any investment in infrastructure. Wider housing market reform is needed to address those problems, he argues.

"Nature should be at the heart of the recovery in the north of England," he says. IPPR North has highlighted the jobs created by planting trees and restoring peatland. Their research found that, across the UK, 46,000 jobs could be created from investment in nature over the next ten years, with the nature-rich North likely to benefit the most.

Similarly, deprived areas are most likely to benefit from the reduced flood risk, improved air quality and access to nature from a restored woodland. “These things won’t happen automatically,” he says, “we need to make sure fairness is at the heart of the agenda.”

Murphy and IPPR North have pointed out that the Northern Forest, while welcome, will only make a dent in forest coverage, raising it just below 1 percent in the area. They are advocating for a more ambitious programme of half a billion trees in the UK to meet climate targets. They also want to see a longer-term plan to manage and protect new woodlands, ensuring the benefits are maintained. “It’s not just about planting and moving on”, Murphy says.

Communities are already seeing benefits from the Northern Forest. Miles away from Scammonden, on the edge of Greater Manchester, a working-class area is part of the same Northern Forest. The land by the Hillock Estate, now called Boz Park, was gifted to the community by a farmer in memory of his son Colin Boz Tracey. However, the local council had never been able to make the most of its potential as a park or green space.

“Nobody knew about it, other than the people around it,” says councillor Andrea Simpson. Recent budget cuts contributed to a feeling of neglect. The area was regularly vandalised, and the nearby main road meant it was vulnerable to fly-tipping.

The City of Trees initiative, a local organisation that is part of the Northern Forest programme, worked with councillors to start planting a community forest. This is part of the 537,000 trees they have already planted across the Greater Manchester area. “It’s an amazing resource,” says Kevin Wigley, operations manager at City of Trees, who grew up just five minutes away.

During lockdown, locals made good use of Boz Park. The space was used for nature scavenger hunts and to give out books and activities for children. “People who weren’t walking have started walking”, says Simpson.

The Northern Forest is many different things to many people, leveraging investment to create jobs, while improving the quality of life for communities that have been at the sharp end of economic change and austerity. The challenge will be growing that ambition to make nature a larger part of a equitable economy.

Source: <https://www.newstatesman.com/spotlight/investment/2020/11/how-trees-can-help-rebalance-economy>