

Forests and Recreation

Recreational use of forests, both state and private, is set to grow significantly as a result of increased levels of urbanisation, growing wealth and leisure time and increasing interest in outdoor pursuits, as well as the growth of special interests in all aspects of nature. The change in the forestry sector with diversification into recreation is creating a need for research, training, technical updates and special new skills development.

With the launch of the report *Review of Forest Recreation Research Needs in Ireland* COFORD acknowledged the role of an important non-timber forest product: forest recreation.

Forest recreation has been a management objective in the Irish forest estate since the opening of Ireland's first forest park at Gougane Barra in 1966; however, developments in forest recreation have not always had the highest priority in a developing forest industry. Clinch (1999) states that while there has been a serious deficiency in data on forest recreational use he estimated a total of 8.5 million annual visits to Irish forests at that time. More recently, the publication of Coillte's *Recreation Policy – Healthy Forest, Healthy Nation* in 2005 and the Forest Service's *Forest Recreation in Ireland – A Guide for Forest Owners and Managers* in 2006, have given a new impetus to the development of forest recreation in Ireland.

Today, forest recreation users are arguably more active and environmentally aware than those of a generation ago. Consequently there are new and increasing demands being made on the forest for recreation, and forest managers need to address a wide range of issues dealing with the provision of recreation. These can range from the impact that recreation usage can have on forest activities, biodiversity or indeed other users, to the need to create woodland amenities within easy reach of a growing urban population. Recreation also has an important part to play in education on several levels. Furthermore the relationship between forest design, town planning and the use of forests are all linked to recreation in one way or another.

Research is currently underway on specific aspects of forest recreation as part of two wider studies on forest economics funded by COFORD. The FORECON project aims to explore the interaction between different approaches to forest management and the values assigned to recreation; and also the inter-relationship between recreational motivations and site satisfaction. The FIRMEC project focuses on modeling where the demand for recreation, particularly in relation to farm forests, is likely to occur. The combination of outputs from these projects will facilitate the generation of cost-benefit analysis of forest recreation and quantify its economic contribution to national, regional and local economies (see the Forest Economics and Policy section of this report for further details).

COFORD will be funding further research on forest recreation and a call for project proposals is in preparation.

¹ Clinch, J.P. 1999. *Economics of Irish Forestry: Evaluating the Returns to Economy and Society*. COFORD, Dublin.