

KNOWLEDGE FEEDS DECISION MAKING

THE PEOPLE'S SAY IN UK FORESTRY

Gillian Petrokofsky, Gabriel Hemery and Nick D. Brown explain how you can take part in a project that is giving the people a chance to secure a future for Britain's trees, woods and forests.

The value of forestry and silviculture in shaping the British countryside may not have diminished over the last century but there have been dramatic shifts in the services and products that woodlands of the 21st Century are expected to deliver. There are new challenges too with rapid environmental change, new pests and diseases and novel economic and social conditions to grapple with.

Many of these new directions and uncertainties require fresh forest policies to guide decisions and achieve the desired objectives. This places heavy demands on forestry research to come up with the information to form sound, evidence-based policy. Often this requires new approaches to research and will even involve entirely new disciplines in contributing to the forest knowledge base. But this creates a further problem. Whilst forestry may be the younger sister of agriculture, forestry research is treated like Cinderella. With research funding in very short supply and ever increasing demands for research from a widening group of players there is a real need for priority setting.

We have set up a project, at the University of Oxford, to try and identify the most urgent and important forestry research questions. The aim is to use a 'bottom-up' approach so that a wide range of people, who have an interest in forestry, can contribute their views. We want to identify those problems which are critical or interesting enough to prioritise for research funding from

either public or private sources.

We have called the project the 'Top Ten Questions for Forestry' (T10Q) and our aim will be to arrive at a manageable number (perhaps ten) of policy-relevant research questions which have wide support amongst those with an interest in forestry in its widest sense.

T10Q builds on a very successful model developed by Professor William Sutherland in ecology. In 2005, a group of representatives from 28 organizations involved in policy making and ten academic institutions met in a two-day workshop to determine the 100 most important ecological questions of relevance to policy in the UK (Sutherland et al., 2006). We are using a web-based survey tool to engage with

forestry stakeholders, but the heart of the project process is similar - an iterative process of prioritising research questions of relevance to forestry in the UK and Ireland.

Context of the T10Q project

Until relatively recently, UK forestry policy was not highly participatory, perhaps as a result of the strategic nature of forest policy after the First World War and the formation of a State-controlled body to oversee a large-scale reforestation programme.

However, public involvement in environmental decision-making is one of the central themes of the 1992 United Nations

"Forestry or Silviculture may be called the younger sister and the servant of Agriculture. Each of these arts is essential to the welfare of nations, and no people can be said to be wise, politic, or economic which does not pay attention to the advancement of both."

Nisbet 1905

Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the 'Earth Summit'. Although UNCED's focus is on poverty alleviation, public involvement also accords with current thinking on governance and democracy. It is expected now that people's views on a variety of policy issues are sought through open and well-informed debate. Whereas State ownership in agriculture is confined to a few experimental farms, the State owns 35% of Britain's forest and woodland, which it manages on behalf of the nation. The concept that communities of interest (stakeholders) should be involved in decision-making sits well with the knowledge that 'the people' own much of the woodland for which decisions are being taken in their name.

Vetting of forestry grants by broad-based regional advisory committees is an indirect form of stakeholder involvement; the ability for all to comment on forest grant schemes and felling applications, which the Forestry Commission is prepared to approve is another. The latest stage in the emergence of a more open and consultative approach has been the development of English, Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh forestry strategies which have included substantial consultative elements and have allowed stronger stakeholder representation (O'Brien and Claridge, 2002).

There is, however, a much less tangible sense of broad stakeholder engagement with the research process. The International Union of Forestry Research Organizations (IUFRO) conducted extensive research into the problems of linkage between science and policy and suggested a number of ways in which science can be more influential. Amongst these was a recommendation for better communication between researchers and other stakeholders (Guldin et al., 2005).

There are many examples in the UK alone of science failing to influence policy adequately. Reasons have been put forward to explain this – the science is irrelevant; the proposed solutions arising from the science are too expensive; society is not ready to accept the solutions; politicians are not willing to propose these solutions to the public. But these are problems of implementation. Some of the problems start well

before this. According to Taylor (2005), the first rule in the game of making science more influential is to win the argument about what the problem is before trying to win the argument about what the solution is

Framing questions that relate to the policy challenges of the 21st Century will be fundamental to commissioning relevant research, and will make best use of limited funding resources. The internet surely makes it possible for stakeholders to have a greater say in this critical framing stage in the research agenda. We believe that our project is a first attempt at harnessing the interactive power of the internet to involve people in a debate about research and policy in forestry.

Nisbet (1905) made some caustic remarks over a hundred years ago about forestry decisions taken on the basis of 'evidence that is incomplete and therefore misleading'. It is astonishing to note that it was not until the end of that century that 'evidence-based policy-making' became the norm, moving out of the realm of medicine and into other science-informed disciplines.

Background to evidence based policy

The Labour Government arrived in 1997 with a 'modernising agenda' and a commitment to delivering 'policies that matter' and which are 'based on all available best evidence' (Cabinet Office, 1999a; Cabinet Office, 1999b). An important consequence of a robust science base is that it can be used to help avoid the type of policy disaster which occurred at the time of the BSE outbreak in the UK and which led to a great loss of public confidence in science and in politicians, when the government admitted that it had ignored relevant research on the disease and its control (van Zwanenberg & Millstone, 2005).

Evidence-based policy making is now established Government practice. Defra, the department which deals most closely with forestry-related issues in England, explicitly states that they view it as an approach to policy development and implementation which uses 'rigorous techniques to develop and maintain a robust evidence base from which to develop policy options' (<http://www.defra.gov.uk>

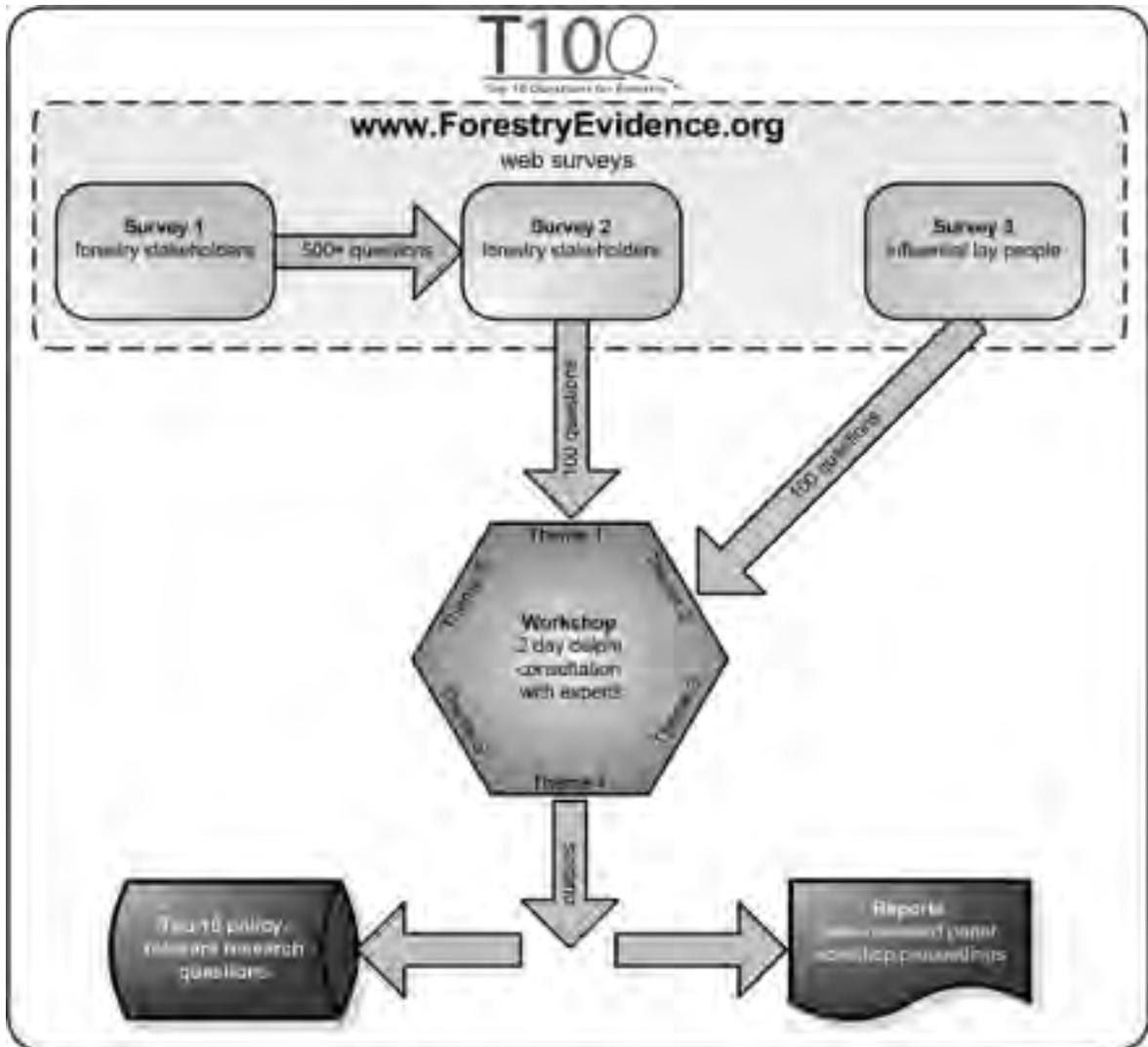


Figure 1. T10Q –'Top Ten Questions for Forestry'.

/science/how/evidence.htm).

The Forestry Commission is committed to creating a robust evidence base grounded in high quality science (Forestry Commission, 2005); and many key stakeholder groups who contribute to decision-making in forestry arenas likewise commit themselves to using sound evidence.

A knowledge base utilising high-quality scientific research is essential for good policy making; wide participation in policy-making is increasingly encouraged. We feel strongly, therefore, that it is timely to explore a mechanism for wider engagement with the

research process itself at all stages, including the crucial early phase of question framing.

Concluding remarks

Tim Rollinson, Director General of the UK Forestry Commission, recently announced his intention to establish a centre for forestry and climate change to implement a climate change action plan for the forest sector. In his statement to the 2008 Annual Conference of the Institute of Chartered Foresters (Forestry Commission, 2008) he emphasised the point that a prerequisite to delivering results is authoritative

information. His comments that 'our knowledge is incomplete, inconsistent, and sometimes confusing' strongly echoed Nisbet from a century ago.

The key to finding solutions to the challenges

facing forestry in the 21st Century is, as Taylor says, defining the problem (Taylor, 2005). This means asking the right questions in an environment which encourages creative thinking.

The T10Q project. Your chance to secure a future for Britain's trees, woods and forests

We want to engage with people in the UK and Ireland who are thinking about forestry and woodland policy and research, and who have an interest in the challenges of woodland management. We are keen to solicit views about what people feel are the most pressing issues we face, and therefore where our scientists and policy makers should be focusing their efforts and resources.

The project will involve three separate online surveys and a workshop.

Phase 1. Online surveys in May-August 2008

Using an internet-based survey tool (www.ForestryEvidence.org) we will ask people with an interest in forestry (stakeholders) to participate anonymously in two confidential surveys between May and July.

We are seeking the views of a large number of organisations and individuals connected with forestry and woodland management across the UK and Ireland. In an iterative process, survey participants will contribute to the setting and ranking of a series of policy – relevant research questions.

The first two surveys are designed with a professional audience in mind, while the third survey is designed to elicit the views of a wider 'lay' audience.

The three surveys will contribute directly to the second phase of the project which will be a 2-day workshop in Oxford to consolidate the emerging messages.

Phase 2. Workshop in September 2008

The aim of the workshop will be to pull together and explore in depth the issues raised by stakeholders in the earlier survey rounds.

We are aiming for an attendance by about 40 invited individuals from key organisations who have an interest in exploring further the links between research and policy.

The workshop will be documented in a report, which will be distributed online, and in a collaboratively written paper which will be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal.

The aim of the workshop will be to arrive at a list of the Top Ten Questions in Forestry, collectively discussed and prioritised. These will be fed back into the wider survey group for further comment.

Why participate?

Organisations invest a great deal of resources in creating and maintaining their own channels of communication to fulfil their institutional remits. There are well-established means of looking at questions of research and policy within rapidly changing environments. The T10Q project is not driven by a belief that existing structures are failing; rather it is offering a neutral platform for debate by groups who may not currently engage with each other or who would like a different way of communicating and sharing ideas about what is considered important in forestry for the short-, medium- and long-term.

There is growing awareness that one of the key factors inhibiting science flow into policy is the way in which questions are framed. Can the distributed method of question framing which we will explore in the T10Q project tell us anything new about the types of questions we could be asking?

Have your say: www.ForestryEvidence.org

We hope that the T10Q project will help create a framework for such creative thinking.

If you would like to participate in the surveys or find out more about the project please visit our website www.forestryevidence.org or contact us at T10Q@forestryevidence.org

We hope you will join us in this exciting project!

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