



Forestry paradigms and policy change: The evolution of forestry policy in Britain in relation to the ecosystem approach

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ABSTRACT

Forestry policy and practice in Britain has been subject to a series of paradigm changes since the establishment of the Forestry Commission in 1919. Drawing on a documentary analysis of legislation, published policy statements, commentaries and scholarly critiques, this paper argues that British forestry policy has undergone three significant paradigm shifts since it was first mooted in the late 19th century. With origins in a largely ad hoc and laissez-faire attitude towards forest expansion and management which dominated up to World War I, a productivist stance based on intensive mono-culture plantations in order to reduce import dependence then held sway until the early 1970s. This has since been overlain with ideas about multi-functionality and sustainability that continue to be important today. The new ecosystem approach (and its specific emphasis on the provision of ecosystem services) can arguably be viewed as an emerging new forestry paradigm era in which ideas of resilience and sustainability are to the fore. It is suggested in conclusion that while the policy and practice of forestry in Britain continues to mirror broader shifts in environmental governance within the country, these in turn are increasingly influenced by international debates and obligations.

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1. Introduction

The balance between the commercial importance and societal contribution of forestry and woodland in Britain has changed significantly since the setting up of the Forestry Commission and the advent of a recognisably government-led policy for forestry in 1919. Prior to this forestry was already becoming a strategically important sector. This was reflected in the shift towards state organisation that was enshrined in the 1919 Forestry Act and a long series of reassessments and changes of emphasis which followed. The literature offers various analyses of these developments (e.g., Mather, 1991; Tsouvalis, 2000; Mason, 2007) but few have examined the drivers behind these ebbs and flows. Many changes can be traced to key ideas and frameworks which shaped debate and justified the adoption of new policy paradigms but which also required the broader socio-economic context to be favourable in order to be adopted. Moreover, while forestry policy in Britain has been strongly influenced by national concerns and domestic circumstances, for instance the more or less complete eradication of native forest and severe war-time timber shortages (Mather, 1991),

formal international policy influences have become increasingly important in recent years. Indeed, in common with most of the western world, forestry policy and management is now shaped by a series of world views and international obligations which influence beliefs and impact on practice.

A useful way to conceptualise the role of arguments and ideas in shaping and reshaping an important public policy domain such as forestry is that of a policy paradigm. A paradigm can be defined as “a dominant belief structure that organises the way people perceive and interpret the functioning of the world around them” (Milbrath, 1984; p. 7). At any point, new circumstances may challenge the belief and value structure of the dominant paradigm (Brown and Harris, 2000), and cause a shift in focus. Such paradigm shifts can be seen as a “profound change in thoughts, perceptions and values that form a particular vision of reality” (Capra, 1982; p. 30). Some commentators have argued that the process of paradigmatic change is characterised by a revolutionary departure from established procedures (e.g., Kuhn, 1962; Hall, 1993). Others, in particular social scientists, prefer to characterise the process as evolutionary in nature (Skogstad and Schmidt, 2011). Previous studies of paradigm evolution and change suggest that while some threshold events can be identified which lead to the replacement of one paradigm by another, more often there is an accumulation of ideas and rationales over time, leading to backward referencing, reassessment

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and rebranding. Policy analysts have had a particular interest in the role of arguments and ideas in framing policy choices and justifying changes in policy direction (e.g., Hall, 1993; Coleman et al., 1996; Skogstad, 2011). Peter Hall (1993), in his classic study of British macro-economic policy in the 1970s and 1980s, explored the idea of policy paradigms, pointing to periods of continuity in public policy, punctuated by occasional paradigm shifts when existing ideas and standards were questioned, bringing about shifts in policy direction. A policy paradigm can be defined as “a powerful cognitive-normative concept that permits the analysis of distinctly different, sometimes incommensurable ways of conceptualising the issues, problems, interests, goals, and remedies involved in policymaking” (Carson et al., 2009; p. 7).

Hall (1993) groups shifts in policy into first, second and third order changes, “according to the magnitude of the changes involved” (p. 287) which will be used as the basic framework for this analysis. He sees first and second order change as “normal policymaking”, i.e., “a process that adjusts policy without challenging the overall terms of a given policy paradigm” (p. 79). By contrast, third order policy changes are “likely to reflect a very different process, marked by the radical changes in the overarching terms of policy discourse” (p. 279). This he characterises as a ‘paradigm shift’. First order changes are likely to display the features of routinized decision making, such as the adjustment of fiscal and monetary instrument settings (Hall, 1993). Second order policy changes move one step further, and may include new policy instruments, however without changing the overall policy goals (Hall, 1993). By contrast, third order changes are likely to display a radical change of the hierarchy of goals, of policy settings, and the set of instruments employed to guide such policy, including the introduction and/or elimination of regulatory instruments. According to Hall, these radical shifts usually go together with a more substantial change in the analysis on which previous policy was based. Coleman et al. (1996) adapts many of these ideas to present an analysis of agricultural policy paradigm change in Australia, Canada and the United States. Drawing on the conceptual tools of policy feedbacks and networks, their work suggests that change is a negotiated process between various group representatives and state actors, resulting in a “more managed series of policy changes that culminate in a paradigm shift” (p. 273). In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly been given to the implications for domestic policy development of various transnational influences (Skogstad, 2011; Carson et al., 2009), including the role of formal international organisations, global networks of various state and private actors, and civil advocacy groups in paving the way for paradigmatic policy change (Skogstad, 2011).

Those scholars who have explored the historical development of forestry policy in any detail (e.g., Mather, 1991; Richards, 2003; Nail, 2010) typically trace observable shifts in forest cover and management over time, but only indirectly distinguish between the scientific, social and policy dimensions of such shifts of emphasis. In her study of Britain’s state forests, for instance, Judith Tsouvalis (2000) investigated the relationships between world views and the woodland management practices in Britain that come to be associated with them, particularly focusing on the Forestry Commission and its overlapping spheres of influence. Other authors have focussed on forest (resource) management paradigms (e.g., Brown and Harris, 2000; Kline et al., 2013) or forest cover change in the context of the overall land use pattern, frequently termed a forest transition (e.g., Mather, 1991; Barbier et al., 2010). Our review of the literature suggests that there have been no academic studies focusing specifically on forest policy paradigms in Britain or elsewhere, though Kline et al. (2013) briefly summarise historical forest management paradigms in the United States and relate these to economic approaches. These authors divide the 20th century into three distinct national forest management phases, each of which, they argue, “can be traced to specific socioeconomic forces and laws

enacted by the US Government” (Kline et al., 2013; p. 141). Other authors’ (e.g., Behan, 1990; Kennedy and Quigley, 1998; Brown and Harris, 2000) have looked at various aspects of forest resource management paradigm shifts in the 1980s and 90s, again in the United States. Alexander Mather (1990), in his seminal work on ‘Global Forest Resources’ analysed change in forest use and cover in the context of overall land use change. He suggests a three stage transition from ‘pre-industrial’ to ‘industrial’, and, more recently, ‘post-industrial’ forestry practices. In the following year, Mather (1991) proposed “a broad temporal sequence of these three stages” for European forests during the twentieth century, using distinct milestones to mark the transitions (p. 245). In this same article, Mather also reviews trends in British forestry policy against the background of the more general shift from industrial to post-industrial forests (Mather, 1991).

Despite a wide application of the core concept, applying a paradigm framework to explain specific periods of policy stability and change is not a straightforward task. Paradigm shifts are often hard to identify at a specific point in time. They often constitute “a phase in a broader process of change”, entailing alterations in institutional arrangements, the redefinition of policy problems and the reordering of guiding principles (Carson et al., 2009; p. 377). This process frequently takes place over extended periods and accumulates through a long series of organisational and regulatory changes (Carson et al., 2009). Moreover, most commentators acknowledge “the existence of competing paradigms in any given context” (Surel, 2000; p.502). A dominant paradigm, if there is one, is thus not necessarily exclusive, adding to the overall complexity of (public policy) paradigm research. Furthermore, in a transnational context, the ‘diffusion’ of a new (policy) paradigm entails frequently complex and, at times, inconsistent mechanisms of adaptation (Surel, 2000). This, Surel (2000) argues, depends on the one hand on the nature and extent of the previous paradigm, and on the other, on “the institutional configurations specific to each country which act as filters to the dominant paradigm” (p. 42). Transnational norms are therefore likely to be ‘localised’ and introduced in parts, rather than adopted in their entirety (Acharya, 2004; Skogstad and Schmidt, 2011). An ‘operative’ policy paradigm on the national level, may thus not necessarily be the same as the conceptual framework that has originally guided it (Carson et al., 2009).

Given these analytical challenges, the overall aim of this paper is to review and analyse recent trends in British forestry policy in terms of paradigm change through a primarily top-down analysis, complementing Tsouvalis’s more bottom-up approach. Drawing on a comprehensive review of the published literature, particular emphasis will be placed on how wider more formal international and European policy-making processes are coming to exert growing influence on national forestry policy and operations. In this article, Hall’s policy paradigm framework will be applied to British forestry, using Mather’s forestry transition categories as a starting point. We go on to develop a more refined differentiation of Mather’s post-industrialist period. This will be done primarily through a review and analysis of key legislative and other policy measures and forestry policy statements. Although the relevant events can be described here only in brief terms, we identify key policy milestones which mark the most important transitions.

2. Methods and approach

There are various methods available to investigate, analyse and diagnose paradigm shifts of the sort discussed above. In this paper, a qualitative, interpretative and iterative approach has been applied, based on textual methods, mainly documentary review and analysis. Relevant public documents were reviewed, in particular international, European and UK forestry policy documents,

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