

**F O R E S T   V I L L A G E S**  
*Deriving social, environmental and economic benefits from the forest*

**A PROPOSAL FOR SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY**

## Changes made to the Background Document

13th July 2005	Changed references to “Forest Croft Communities” to “Forest Village” to avoid confusion.
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## Forest Villages

This document outlines the parameters of a model for Forest Villages. It suggests a way forward for people who want access to the land, to live in a forest community and derive a living based on Agro Forestry, restoring the link between those who wish to live and work in the forest and the forest itself. Affordable, ecologically sound housing for villagers and local people could be built from sawn timber produced on site. A diverse and sustainable economy could be developed which would provide both timber and non-timber products for local markets and beyond. The environment would benefit as a more diverse mix of more useful species replace the current plantings and invasive species are controlled. The social benefits of rural re-population, training opportunities, job creation and attendant revival of local services would benefit all who live and work in the locality.

This is the first stage in a process of developing a model for Forest Villages. It is intended to be a discussion document, designed to stimulate discussion and encourage contributions from other interested parties. To contribute to the debate, and to find out how the model develops, please contact David Blair.

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### Introduction

At the Scottish Forestry Forum of 15th November 2004 the Minister Lewis MacDonald made reference to Forestry Crofts as part of a sustainable future for Scottish forestry thus placing them firmly on the agenda.

It is envisaged that the success of Forest Villages would be dependent both on community and on diversity. It would be necessary for a group of Villagers to work co-operatively in order to manage an area of common forestry, due to the type of work involved. A diverse mix of social, economic and environmental elements will help to ensure the stability and therefore the sustainability of the community.

Any proposed model for Forest Villages would have to be dynamic, taking advantage of ever changing opportunities to provide both for its own needs and the needs of the local community. Therefore, as its survival is not dependent on any one factor, unforeseen changes would be much less likely to have a large effect. Nor would its activities compromise the future of the community or the environment. It is envisaged that the primary means of income for Villagers would be from an Agro-Forestry system, carefully designed to work with nature, to provide housing, fuel, food, power and a secure income for the community.

The model will demonstrate that the environment would have to be managed to provide for the long-term needs of the community, but at the same time it will encourage bio-diversity through natural regeneration to provide habitat for native flora and fauna, including humans. It is clear that Forest Villages have a role to play not only in forestry but also by contributing significantly to achieving economic stability, social cohesion and environmental sustainability for Scottish communities wherever they may be.

Scottish Planning Policy 15 (SPP 15 "Planning for rural development" Feb 2005) states in the planning vision

*"Rural Scotland needs to become more confident and forward looking both accepting change and benefiting from it, providing for people who want to continue to live and work there and welcoming newcomers. Traditional ways of living will remain but new ones should function alongside. The intention is to have vigorous and prosperous rural communities, ranging from small towns and villages to dispersed settlements. The countryside should be able to absorb more people content to live and able to work there. The clear goal will be to maintain the viability of existing communities and bring new life to many places, which have seen years of decline. Scotland's rural areas are a unique resource with significant long term potential as places to live and work. This special potential is replicated in only a few places in northern Europe and, arguably, nowhere else on this scale in the UK. Future lifestyle changes and technological development may well increase the demand for living and working in rural areas".*

## **Project Background**

Many rural communities suffer from a severe shortage of affordable housing which in turn leads to rural depopulation in favour of the towns and cities where housing and the jobs to go with them are in greater supply. In Scotland these housing difficulties compound the problem of socio-economic decline in remote rural areas. Forest Villages could play a vital role in solving the housing shortage in a way that puts sustainability at the top of the agenda.

In the original 1886 Crofting Act the general principle of a croft was to provide people with the opportunity to create a home and a chance to earn a livelihood on land with security of tenure. The crofting system promotes a small-scale agricultural system linking people to the land on which they live and often base other diverse economic activities. The Forest Village is a natural progression for the crofting system, which is based around the local management and control of resources for the benefit of the local community.

The Scottish Executive has recognised the shortage of affordable housing in rural areas, and is seeking to address this shortage. Sustainable houses, and indeed sustainable communities will be most satisfactorily built by making best use of the abundant local resource that is Sitka spruce. This best use will require the development of new approaches both to the use of timber and the development of skills and knowledge in the local community. Forest villages are a means for delivering a number of benefits to rural communities in Scotland. It is envisaged that forest villages will develop new ways of managing and delivering public benefits from existing under-utilised conifer plantations by, for example, developing affordable housing, introducing new skills into rural areas, and creating improved business and educational opportunities. A different approach to managing some areas of plantation forestry will enhance economic, environmental and social outputs.

Cowal is one area that has been identified by Forestry Commission (FCS) as an area where there is a shortage of affordable housing, and where forest land could be given up for affordable housing. This proposal takes the principle of for-

est villages one stage further, developing the model of “forest villages”, a community which is enhanced by the process of building the houses, and continues to deliver rural development and environmental justice.

### **Developing forest villages**

To convert the idea of forest villages to reality will require the development of a model, prior to the establishment of a pilot scheme.

So what is a Forest Village? In a nutshell, it’s a group of people living and working in the forest to earn a living. Forestry work takes a lot of energy and is best achieved by a group of people acting co-operatively, especially if the full life cycle, from the tree to the finished product (housing, crafts, fuel-wood etc.) is happening within the forest. With problems of invasive species, such as Rhododendron Ponticum and Japanese knotweed, becoming more widespread, which take a lot of physical labour to control, there is all the more need to have people living and working on the land who are custodians of that land.

Many of Scotland’s rural towns and villages have forestry ‘up to the back door’ which currently provides few benefits to the local community. There should be a mutually beneficial relationship in having a Forest Village close to, but not in the face of, an existing community. It means that infrastructure and services are already in place, such as roads, school, shop, post office, hotel, telephone and grid connection and most importantly – people. The Forest Village would offer more people, to support the school, shop, post office, hotel etc, but also affordable housing both to buy and to rent, fuel-wood, crafts, employment opportunities, renewable energy and a recreationaleducational resource. Of course it is not a fixed thing and would be adaptable to different circumstances.

### **Ownership models.**

Control of the resource requires careful consideration. There are various existing models which need to be more fully considered, and legal enquiries to make. However it is envisaged that the Forest Village might follow one of the following models

1. managed by members of the Forest Village and the wider community, which would have ownership of the land and housing stock. Members could then either buy or rent housing at agreed rates, providing they agree to abide by the constitution. The housing would be tied to the management of the forest and if housing is bought by members, a condition of sale would ensure that the housing can only be sold back to the trust and not onto the open market. This would prevent the housing from becoming holiday homes and ensure that it stays affordable and available for new villagers. The majority of land would be common forestry, managed collectively with a relatively small plot of land for each individual house.
2. A community, where everyone has the tenancy of their own land and shares in the management of a larger common area of forest. This option would work in the same way as traditional croft.
3. Ownership of the land would remain with the Scottish people via the Scottish Parliament. Villagers would be allowed to build housing in the Forest with security of tenure. Responsibility for the management of the Forest would transfer from the Forestry Commission to the Forest Village, working to a Management Plan agreed by all parties.

### **Constitution**

A constitution would be drawn up that would set out the parameters of the Forest Village. All members would sign an agreement that they are willing to work within the guiding principles of the community as laid out in the constitution.

### **Ratio of affordable owned vs. rented social housing**

This would depend on the aspirations and means of the individual villagers. If an individual has the means and desire to own their house then they should be allowed, if not then they should be able to rent or rent to buy.

**Area of forest required to sustain the community.**

This will depend on the quality of the forest and timber crop and the size of the village community. An initial estimate of 20 acres of good forestry to 50 acres of marginal forestry (8 - 20 ha) per house and a cluster of 10 to 20 houses per community gives an area of between 200 and 1000 acres (80 -400 ha).It is important that the carrying capacity of the land and forest resource is not exceeded by the village.

**Develop the case for a forest village**

**Economic modelling:**

Capital and Revenue projections.

There would need to be considerable initial capital investment in order to purchase, or lease the land and to provide the tools and equipment necessary for forestry management and building.

Equipment would include:

Excavator

Forwarder

4 chain-saws and protective equipment

8 inch static Lucas Mill (bio-diesel)

6 inch portable Lucas Mill

“Green” timber treatment tank (Tim-Bor)

Various hand held power tools & safety gear

Revenue would be needed to pay wages of members and to buy in training courses and expertise.

**Restructuring forests to enhance sustainability.**

The first 5 years of the project would be an intensive period of forestry activity and restructuring as timber is extracted for the building of forestry buildings, housing and additional affordable housing for the wider community. As the timber is extracted the site would be assessed for its soil qualities, access and aspect and replanted for long term quality timber or allowed to regenerate naturally as appropriate. The result would be a much more site specific and mixed forest, which would support the needs of the community for the long term and provide increasing opportunity for biodiversity.

**Developing community and micro businesses.**

There are many opportunities for developing small businesses based in and on the forest resource and on other local resources. Whether these micro businesses are individually owned and managed or collectively as a diverse community business managed by the community members via the trust, or whether both options are provided for would depend on the constitution. Businesses could include:

Building of affordable housing stock for sale or rent

Training/ education courses

Forestry management

Renewable energy

Retreat cabins

Bio-diesel production

Organic food production

Mushroom cultivation

Woodcrafts

Plant/tree nursery

Charcoal

Venison

### **Social modelling:**

Developing a new ownership model & impacts on individuals and communities.

A key issue is how to keep the housing for those that want to live and work as forest villagers and not holiday homes in the forest, and to keep affordable housing affordable. Existing ownership models do not address this issue, therefore a new ownership model is required that accounts not only for the needs of the individual, but also the interests of the Community and its membership. One option would be that an agreement is entered into by the villager that would tie the housing to the management of the forest so that those that live in the housing have to derive an income from the forest. Another possibility is that the housing is bought and sold or rented via a community trust thereby keeping it off the open market roller coaster. The trust could function as a kind of community bank or credit union, in which members invest in or borrow from.

Although affordable housing built for the wider community would not be tied to the forest in the same way, it would still be bought and sold or rented at an agreed rate through the trust thereby keeping it off the open market and affordable for those that need it.

This would have a positive impact on individuals and the community as a whole by ensuring the availability of affordable housing and giving people the opportunity to live and work in rural areas, whatever their means.

### **Cultural modelling:**

Developing new community activities.

Many of the activities of a Forest Village would be shared and members would have the opportunity to learn a wide range of skills and work in many different activities in all aspects of the project. Much of this shared activity would be of a social nature and all would help support the community as a whole – “all for one and one for all”.

Outside of working life there would also be many activities that could be shared by the village. A community hall would provide a space for sharing meals or entertainment's, having meetings or running courses. Appropriate seasonal celebrations could be encouraged to promote a connection with time, place and nature and each other.

Researching traditional crofting models and transferability.

Traditional crofting in Scotland provides some important lessons for the Forest Village. Investigating and applying these lessons to the model will form an important part of this development phase.

### **Access potential:**

For all capabilities

The diverse nature of the project should make it accessible to people of all capabilities. Enthusiasm and willingness to learn will be as important as skills and ability. Training would be provided in the necessary skills such as chain-saw work and there would be plenty of opportunity to practice and develop ability. Forestry work is hard and needs people who are fit and able, it is not for everyone, but there are many other aspects of the project such as gardening, making crafts, tree planting, office or crèche that are accessible to all.

### **Educational potential:**

For all ages.

The project has great educational potential and could offer a diverse range of educational and training opportunities. Established Forest Villages could function as training centres and pass their skills onto others who would then be able to manage forestry, build a house, practice agro-forestry, or establish a similar village community elsewhere.

The forestry would be opened up with path networks and nature trails with environmental interpretation so making the forest an educational resource. Local primary schools could be encouraged to use the forest for environmental education. Forest schools could also be established which would give young people an opportunity to live and learn in a natural environment.

There is no age limit to learning and many of the activities and courses would be accessible to people of all ages.

#### **Environmental modelling:**

Impact on the forest environment, highlighting bio-diversity links and the potential to restore Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS)

The Forest Village would have a positive impact on the forest environment. By clearing areas of dense monoculture conifer and restocking with a greater variety of quality timber species and encouraging natural regeneration where appropriate a more mixed and diverse forest environment would be created. This would not only support the needs of the village in the long term but would create a habitat for greater bio-diversity. Many forestry plantations have elements of ancient woodland within them which would act as a seed source for restoring the native habitat.

#### **Elucidate cross links between the above themes**

##### **Legal constraints**

It would have to be investigated how the model fits within the current legal framework. The most likely constraints might be from the planning system but it is possible that a new planning category could be developed that would allow for Forest Villages.

##### **Participatory Appraisal**

An extensive participatory appraisal exercise will be undertaken to engage and seek opinions of the community.

The Forest Village model will be developed to include outcomes.

##### **Assess the suitability of sites in Cowal**

##### **Physical and infrastructure constraints**

A Forest Village could be established anywhere there is forestry and a group of people who wish to live and work there. However, the greatest benefit is achieved when established close to an existing town or village. The Forest Village benefits by having access to existing infrastructure and services such as roads, school, shop, post office, hotel, telephone and grid connection and most importantly – people. The Forest Village would offer – more people, to support the school, shop, post office, hotel etc but also affordable housing both to buy and to rent, fuel-wood, crafts, employment opportunities, renewable energy and a recreationaleducational resource.

A map based study reveals many suitable sites close to existing settlements in Cowal.

##### **Write up a model to include preferred site**

The model will be developed during the next 4 months. A paper will be produced by November 2005.

##### **Information shared with other community groups and FC**

Information will be made available via printed documents, the web, and by articles in the media and presentations to relevant groups.