Seeing the Wood, the Trees and the Catch 22

Up to the middle of the last Century, agroforestry (the integration of trees into farming systems) provided a rich backdrop to large areas of European farmland (see, for example, fascinating pictures at www.montpellier.inra.fr/safe/). However, specialisation in recent decades led to antipathy between agriculturalists and foresters, which has been bad for the development of agroforestry. It could be that this is now changing.

Some of the multiple values of agroforestry systems were recently re-examined at the **Twentieth meeting of the Agroforestry Forum** (recently re-named Farm Woodland Forum; see www.agroforestry.ac.uk), which took place at the Northmoor Trust, Little Wittenham, Oxon.in June. The wide-ranging meeting often fitted with the EFRC view of the need for both appropriate genetic material and the right ways of using it. One striking example was a comparison of ash stands grown from different parts of the UK and mainland Europe. The ash from Wales was clearly adapted to that part of the world, but not to Oxfordshire. However, the ash from north Yorkshire was as good as the best provenances from the Continent – but it then turned out that this was probably the area from which this particular stock had originated.

The field trials also underlined the need for nurse shrubs or trees for walnut in the UK, to avoid the risk of cold damage during the formative years. This observation is important because of the potential for walnut in UK agroforestry systems. A wide range of walnut provenances were under observation, which led to discussions about global climate change and indigenous trees. There is a need for recognition of the declining role for such trees in the face of rapidly increasing temperatures and the complementary need for careful introduction of relevant foreign species and provenances for woodland and for agroforestry.

Northern Ireland success

One example of an agroforestry success story is the ash/pasture/sheep system developed in Northern Ireland. Planted in 1989, the ash grew well in countryside with some of the most sparse tree cover in Europe. As the tree shade increased, the pasture composition shifted towards more shade tolerant pasture species, helping to maintain the sheep. However, in recent years, with a continuous crown cover over the pasture (400 trees per hectare, equivalent to 25 sq m per tree), it became necessary to remove about 20% of the trees to maintain grazing for the sheep. The trees had a larger girth but were less dense in terms of wood quality than their forest grown controls. However, it turned out that they were of excellent quality for hurley and hockey sticks and found a ready market.

Here, the amount of timber produced was sufficient for commercial processing. This might not be the case on a smaller, diversified organic agroforestry holding. However, we were treated to a demonstration of chain-saw wood milling which, with some skill, could be a thrifty solution for a small-scale agroforester. Growing, processing and drying on-farm should easily triple the value of wood at harvest.

Our own contribution, based on Wakelyns Agroforestry and the silvo-poultry system at Sheepdrove, stressed the numerous benefits from organic agroforestry in relation to productivity, soil fertility, biodiversity and social benefits. These depend, of course, on applying organic principles to the development of the systems with the inclusion of tree and crop diversity and no synthetic inputs (except for mulch mats to control weeds during tree establishment).

The need for organic standards for agroforestry in practice was stressed and underlined further in relation to wood products. For example, do we really want accumulated pesticide residues in forms of wood used in food preservation, processing and presentation, or in children's toys, or in animal fodder?

Agroforestry policy

But, if the claims for agroforestry are justified - organic and conventional – and they support strongly Government policy towards sustainable food and farming, biodiversity, clean water and so on, why is agroforestry not actively supported in the UK's new agri-environment schemes?

This seems to be the core of the Catch 22. There is no real promotion for agroforestry because the practice is rare. But, of course, the practice is rare because there is no encouragement for farmers and landowners to undertake the relatively complex investment required.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a significant part of the discussions at the meeting were concerned with policy in this context. At the level of the EU, there is some recognition of agroforestry and its promotion. But, interpretation at national level varies, for example, with the UK some way behind France.

Initiatives to try to improve the situation include a recent e-conference on the subject to develop submissions (by no means the first) to the EU to bolster agroforestry policy. But more needs doing, particularly at the national level. Another initiative which is apparently under way is to develop a new EU COST Action for agroforestry, which could help to mobilise interest and information exchange among interested parties across the EU.

One obviously important initiative for us would be to try to fund a project that would tease out and demonstrate the multiple benefits of organic agroforestry systems for society and the environment. Well, we've tried that – several times – but so far without success. Is there another Catch 22 at work? Or is somebody really not seeing the trees for the wood?

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