

## **Uncertain memory: the landscape of *Forest Pitch***

**Rob St. John**

On a site visit to the *Forest Pitch* in late May 2012, Craig Coulthard and I picked our way through the tangled spruce forest, flecked with drops of remnant rain from an ever-shifting sky. Clouds scudded across the low Borders hills as if caught in a painter's brush-water. We listened to song thrushes improvise tunes to each other through trees, the sound tumbling through gaps in the forest into a flare of spring sunlight on yellow gorse. A tawny owl stopped to watch us awhile before quietly sweeping away like a ghost through the canopy. A beautiful place: did it matter that this was an entirely artificial forest, created less than 20 years before?

I initially thought of *Forest Pitch* in polarised terms: as creating a beacon of 'native' diversity (both human and ecological) within a sea of homogenous, dense and 'non-native' forest. Craig had talked about wanting to find a dark, claustrophobic monoculture woodland through which to cut the *Forest Pitch*: one that drew overt lines between dark and light, black and white, open and closed canopy. An open canopy lets in the light, encouraging ecological diversity and growth, and the clear-cut *Forest Pitch* provides a similar service – however fleeting and ephemeral – to cultural diversity. However, after a series of failed advances onto potential sites, the Clarilawmuir plot was chosen. The low, relatively sparse spruce trees are less dense and foreboding than on many other Scottish commercial plantations, and are fringed by mature deciduous woodland pockmarked by bright gorse and hawthorn.

In many ways, this deviation from the original intention of polarised 'nativity' makes the project more interesting. The dichotomies between native and non-native; natural and artificial; open and closed canopy are certainly hard to pin down at the site. Where does the 'artificial' forest end and the 'natural' forest begin? Does our experience of walking through the woods differ through these different zones?

Ideas of what is 'natural' or 'native' in terms of cultural history or heritage – or that of the environments that surround us – are often inherently political and charged with emotion. Ecologically, populations of humans, plants and animals have shifted so dramatically (and often unpredictably) in the past that attempting to pick a time period when an ecosystem was made up of 'native' populations is largely arbitrary and unhelpful. With the realisation that populations have never stayed still – and probably never will – the task of defining nativity becomes more complex. Scotland no longer harbours wolves (the last of which was shot in the 17<sup>th</sup> century), but neither does it support woolly mammoths or aurochs, both of which survived the tundra environments of Pleistocene Scotland. Which animals are 'native' to Scotland?

The little owl – a close relative of the tawny owl seen on our site visit – is common to England, Wales and southern Scotland and largely regarded as a species native to Britain. However, in reality it is a non-native species, introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and ‘naturalised’ by popular narratives. In other words, the process of defining a ‘native’ species or ecosystem often relies on social choice and construction.

Definitions are increasingly important, as the concepts of ‘natural and ‘native’ ecosystems, plants and animals largely underpin decision making in modern environmental management. However, this definition process is largely influenced by our own social constructions, priorities and narratives, and is as such frequently open to debate. Both practically and conceptually, to fully plan and plant a “restored” ecosystem towards some desired state (whether from a past or current analogue, or one that is imagined) is likely to be impractical - veering perilously close to the management approach of the ‘artificial’ monoculture woodlands bemoaned by so many.

The lines of landscape between ‘what is native?’ and ‘what is natural?’ picked over here sit squarely within the centre of current thinking on environmental restoration, and *Forest Pitch* provides a new and valuable set of challenging perspectives to this debate. *Forest Pitch* is a productive landscape in a multitude of senses. It opens up new spaces (both literal and metaphorical) in which to view, use and think about the landscape, the form it should take, and how it should be used. It is a public piece of landscape art, which through its blurred lines between what is planned, natural, intended or otherwise in the forest development and use over time, encourages an immersive, emotion-led interaction from visitors. It becomes an important and thought provoking ecological site to be visited, a world away from the limited set of visitor boards, ‘biodiversity trails’, and endless other creeping rules and regulations that govern many of our modern interactions with nature.

Fundamentally, this is a project about boundaries: between the wild and the domesticated; the predictable and the uncertain; the diverse and the homogenous; the native and the non-native; between traditional uses of the Borders landscape and ambitious upstarts like *Forest Pitch*. Of course the Borders is a liminal landscape in itself, resisting easy categorisation. Bleak, wind-battered moorland with buzz cut plantations. Stone built towns in warm green valleys. Hills bitten down by flocks of sheep, seedlings stopped from sprouting. There is little of the pastoral romance of the Lake District attached to the Borders, nor the tumultuous environmental and cultural histories of a cleared, ‘Balmoralised’ and increasingly reappropriated Highlands.

It could be said that much of the commercial forest left in the Borders exists as a boundary or edgeland between more celebrated, diverse landscapes. In a 2002 essay, Marion Shoard coined the term ‘edgeland’ to describe the ‘wild’ places that sit uncomformingly between city and countryside – wasteland, allotments, industrial estates, roadside verges – all supporting a host of vigorously adaptable

flora and fauna. Shoard's work echoed a theme explored by Richard Mabey in his 1973 book *The Unofficial Countryside*, which logged and celebrated a surprising natural history of crumbling city docks, overgrown bomb sites, urban canals and rubbish tips. For Mabey, these edgeland adventures-close-to-home evoked a wildness: untamed, un-sanitised and often unappreciated landscapes. Neither Shoard nor Mabey explicitly defines plantation forests as 'edgelands', but I believe many (including Clarilawmuir) fit the bill: scrappy, unappreciated, largely unvisited ecosystems in the twilight of their productivity.

In the context of the nativity theme that threads a hereditary path through this piece, Mabey's writing highlights another important set of concepts in our valuing of nature: the concepts of 'wildness' and 'wilderness'. The idea of a 'wilderness' – much like the idea of a 'natural' or 'native' ecosystem – suggests some Edenic original and 'othered' state, a landscape 'untrammelled' (as the original 1964 USA Wilderness Act put it) by humans. Of course, the concept and naming of wilderness in Britain is vastly different to the USA – it is largely accepted that there is no land left on our small islands that has not been in some way altered by humans. But this doesn't stop the concept creeping into environmental management plans – especially ones looking to gather support from a public susceptible to such value-laden concepts. It isn't hard to find high-profile environmental restoration projects in Scotland that look to 'recreate wilderness'. Surely this is an impossible task given the human effort involved in restoration?

Arguments over what constitutes 'wilderness' will continue to gust in and out, yet it is the self-willed 'wildness' that Mabey, Shoard and others find in these landscapes that are neither 'true' nature nor completely controlled that is a far more interesting concept. *Walden* author Henry David Thoreau famously stated '*in wildness is the preservation of the world*'. Perhaps indicatively, this is largely misquoted as 'in wilderness'. Thoreau's 19<sup>th</sup> century retreat, Walden Pond in Massachusetts, is similarly often held up as some remote hermitage by wilderness enthusiasts, yet was an inherently human landscape, not far from a town and frequented by day-trippers and holiday-makers. Wildness is a quality inherent to certain environments – hard to adequately define, yet self-willed and brimming with life, death, diversity and uncertainty. The buddleia that throng railway sidings with swathes of purple, white and yellow; the tansies, teasels, willowherbs and uncertain-weeds-or-wildflowers that pinprick our waysides and woodlands with subtle colour; wheeling peregrine falcons nesting in derelict mill towers; gorse and hawthorn bushes flashing coconut yellow and white from windfall gaps in stifled, monoculture forest plantations.

Wildness in this conception differs from 'wilderness' in acknowledging and accepting the human presence in the environment, and celebrating the adaptability and ingenuity of plants and animals that

find their own niche in modified, manufactured landscapes. Common to the ideas of dissolving imagined boundaries that permeate the *Forest Pitch* project, the essence of wildness doesn't always conform to native/non-native designations – with adaptable plants springing eternally into newly created niches in the landscape. Iain Sinclair is another author with a fascination with life in the edgelands – his *London Orbital* and (most recently) *Ghost Milk* books trace lines made by walking through urban-suburban-rural hinterlands, between the grey and the dull green. *Ghost Milk* bemoans the trampling of underappreciated edgelands in Britain by 'Grand Projects', most notably the Lea Valley in London by the Olympic Games. It's an interesting thought that *Forest Pitch* – a project funded by the Cultural Olympiad – is attempting to do precisely the opposite – to celebrate life in the edgelands.

This idea of finding and valuing wild, diverse, beautiful environments outside of traditionally defined areas of 'wilderness' nature is crucial. For a sustainable environmental ethic, we cannot only look to the value of large tracts of 'wilderness' land somewhere else, but also need to value the nature close to home. And it is this sense of the 'wild' and the uncertain that *Forest Pitch* is injecting into this edgeland plantation ecosystem, largely unvisited and unloved.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Forest Pitch* has drawn murmurs of criticism from people who see the creation and subsequent discarding of a well funded football pitch and changing rooms as necessarily wasteful, regardless of the project's artistic value. Whilst I fully understand and empathise with this view, I think it may be a little short sighted. The real value – the usefulness, even – of this project is likely to be emergent over decades, as the pitch develops, grows and picks its own uncertain path. This is a project about dissolving boundaries, challenging preconceptions about how this edgeland landscape should be managed and used.

There is a sense of performance in *Forest Pitch*, in populating the landscape with people, with life, with diversity. The sinuous path, picking its way through the plantation forest, marking time with every footstep, lends a sense of anticipation and semi-bewilderment to the act of passing through the trees. Throughout the site's re-growth, visitors will be confronted with a rich, thought-provoking yet largely non-didactic landscape (a world away from most manicured, managed and sign-posted 'nature' reserves in Britain) that asks: what should this landscape look like? What is natural here? What is wild, and what is planned by human hand?

There's excitement in the potential myth (and mischief) making concerning the *Forest Pitch* in the future, as stories of the project are passed into cultural memory to be remembered, refracted and potentially redrafted. Kids forging their own paths through the forest in a few decades will reach a landscape we cannot fully predict or plan for. Perhaps amongst the tangle of re-growth, visitors will notice regular patterns in the trees standing sentinel through the site: what pattern is this? Why isn't

this patch like the rest of the forest around us? At some point, the surrounding plantation forest will be ready to harvest. The *Forest Pitch* will then be exposed, like some self-seeding beacon of wildness, diversity and semi-chaos amongst the stumps and brash of the felled forest.

And this is the value of *Forest Pitch*: to bring life and diversity - plants, trees, people - to a landscape well-trammelled by the guiding hand of man. Perhaps paradoxically, in creating a small enclosure for landscape art, this land is opened up and boundaries are broken down. The edgeland environment of tangled plantation forest will be infiltrated by light, colour and, perhaps most of all, uncertainty. Uncertainty is a defining feature of how we must accept our interactions with the natural environment to be: nature cannot always be fully known, controlled or predicted, regardless of how hard we try. Whilst Craig Coulthard denies an overt environmental ethos behind the project, I believe that this focus on the uncertain - trajectories in how the landscape will develop; boundaries over what is 'natural' and what is not, between what is planned and what is not - adds an important new perspective to the debate over the form and future of the British landscape.

*Rob St. John, June 2012*  
robstjohn.tumblr.com

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