

Leisure

Wildlife Watching

Local news and views of the natural world

THE news that the coalition government is holding a public consultation over how to, rather than whether to, privatise forests and woodland controlled by the Forestry Commission has been getting extensive coverage in the media recently.

This coverage has included the objections of many individuals and organisations but, barring right wing 'think tanks', the Country Landowners Association and Conservative politicians enthusiastic support for a sell-off is thin on the ground – even their LibDem partners are being strangely silent on the subject.

Many of the objections to Forestry Commission privatisation are on basic principals such as that of access to their woodlands by right rather with the new landowners permission. Others contend that, having been established and maintained as a national resource with considerable subsidy from the taxpayer, it should be kept as such and its management should continue to be accountable at the ballot box. Those who object to the plan have a number of influential allies. The Green party MP Caroline Lucas said: "If this means vast swathes of valuable forest being sold to private developers, it will be an unforgivable act of environmental vandalism. Rather than asset-stripping our natural heritage, the government should be preserving public access to it, and fostering its role in combating climate change and enhancing biodiversity." Paul Hetherington, spokesman for the Woodland Trust said: "This sale is likely to raise

a tiny amount but could do immeasurable damage and cost the nation dearly. This land will not be sold for anything like its real environmental and social value. There is no way the private sector is going to provide the same level of care [as the commission]."

Wildlife conservation

There are also concerns over the continuation of the wildlife conservation work done by the Forestry Commission. Originally established after the first world war to increase timber stocks, it went about this by establishing conifer plantations on land that was assessed as poor for agriculture. Unfortunately, much of this land was good for wildlife and forestry was a major cause of the loss of many, now scarce, habitats such as heathland. In recent times, however, the commission has lost its image as a wildlife villain and has put biodiversity and conservation at the heart of its policies. Much of the planting it now does is of native broadleaf species and some felled areas are being allowed and encouraged to revert to the wildlife habitat that was originally lost to plantation.

As well as this, the Forestry Commission plays an important role in maintaining the health of the nation's trees. It is the forefront of the fight against *Phytophthora ramorum* – the fungus which causes the disease known as 'sudden oak death' and which has recently shown the unexpected and alarming ability to 'jump species'. Whether even a part-privatised commission could carry out this work as effectively

is another question that is raised by these proposals. Yet another is – will new landowners be prepared to encourage felled areas to revert to a wildlife-friendly state without demanding subsidies to do so. There are fears that, after planning regulations are 'relaxed', new owners will prefer to put this land to other uses such as golf courses, housing or industry.

Lopping the deficit

The need to 'cut the deficit' is being put forward as the reason for these proposals but the case for this does not stack up. After many years of net loss, the commission currently yields more revenue to the exchequer than it attracts in subsidy and, with more and more of its timber stock reaching felling age, this is likely to continue in coming years. It is these trees that may be the most attractive to buyers. By avoiding their establishment and management costs and taking advantage of the tax benefits that forestry enjoys in this country, they become a juicy plum (or pine!) for buyers to pick.

Despite meaningless phrases like 'the big society' and 'free our forests' being bandied around and assurances from government spokespersons that everything will be alright – honest! – there is widespread suspicion over the proposed sell-off. Many will see it as motivated by political ideology. Both the Thatcher and Major governments drew up plans to privatise the Forestry Commission but dropped them in the face of a public outcry.

It seems likely that this consultation will produce a similar reaction. The Prime Minister might do well to accept this, emulate the wisdom of his predecessors and drop the whole idea. This sell-off might not be quite 'Cameron's poll tax' but it is provoking equally passionate, if a little less violent, opposition.

Jack Smith
Local ecologist

Rugby

Tough challenge for Green & Whites

NOTTINGHAM Rugby face yet another busy week as their regular season reaches the business end and play off positions are decided.

Worcester Warriors come to Meadow Lane on Sunday, followed by the visit of fierce local rivals Doncaster Knights on Wednesday evening.

As if that were not enough they then travel to Penzance the following weekend to take on Cornish Pirates.

But at least they have had a full week to recover from the disappointment of their defeat at Bedford last Saturday.

It was more the manner of defeat that was so distressing, having started the game so well with three tries in the opening ten minutes.

From that point on, though, the Green and Whites could not manage another score and fell away badly over the second half as Bedford eased to a 47-19 victory.

Whilst a week's break from the action will have done them good, they face a tough challenge on Sunday from the side relegated from the Premiership last season.

Director of Rugby Glenn Delaney expects the game to

provide one of the hardest tests of the season.

"Worcester have been the team to beat this year," he said. "When we played them at their ground earlier in the season we took two bonus points and nearly took all five.

"We will be looking for that kind of quality again this Sunday. With the home support behind us, we have a chance against anyone."

The game against Warriors is to be screened live on SKY TV and kicks off at 5.30pm.

Cycling

Entries open for the Great Notts Bike Ride

TAKING place on Sunday, June 19 this year, the Great Notts Bike Ride not only marks the start of National Bike Week, but it also represents the fundraising event's 30th birthday.

Starting and finishing at the National Watersports Centre, Holme Pierrepont, the Great Notts Bike Ride will this year feature a 5k family lap challenge for all the family to take part on a safe, road-free circuit; an 18 mile community ride through some of the most beautiful scenery in Nottinghamshire; the event's signature 50 mile challenge ride, and a sportive route of around 75 miles for the more serious rider.

Hugh McClintock, former chairman of the Nottingham

cycling campaign group Pedals, the organisation that founded the ride back in 1982, said:

"The Great Notts Bike Ride is a truly fantastic event which has grown tremendously over the years. It targets such a wide audience, being an ideal event for the whole family to enjoy, whilst still catering for the more serious cyclist, representing the diverse range of cyclists across the city and county.

"Local people should be proud to be part of this event, and I'd like to see a record number of people turn out this year to help us celebrate its 30th anniversary."

Entries are now being

taken for the 2011 Great Notts Bike Ride following the launch of a new website. Riders can log on to www.greatnottsbikeride.com to enter and to get all the latest information about this year's event.

To celebrate the 30th anniversary, event organisers Perfect Motion are offering an Early Bird Discount. Anyone who enters before the end of February will be entitled to discounted rates of £21 for the 75 mile sportive, £16 for the 50 mile challenge ride, £13 for the 18 mile community ride and £18 per family (two adults and two children) wishing to take part in the family lap challenge.



Thought for the Fortnight

He who cannot dance blames the band for being under-rehearsed.

Polish Proverb

The Bee Keeper in BEESTOWN

