

Opening the gates to a multiple use forest

Visiting a forest yields health benefits for the public and potential opportunities for forest owners



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What is it about forests that draws people to them? Maybe it's their unique atmosphere; the opportunity to listen to bird song; the feeling of relaxation or the opportunity to educate our children about nature. The forest can be a welcome break from the sedentary activities of modern technology or simply an opportunity to 'slow down'.

Beyond the very basic 'walk in the woods', our woodlands have huge amenity potential. They are suitable for a range of activities like family picnics, mountain biking, paint balling, orienteering or camping. Never have the benefits of these open air recreational areas been more valuable than during COVID-19.

The development of forests for recreation is seen as an important aspect of sustainable forestry. With the ever increasing size of urban areas, there is a need for increased space for outdoor amenity. Today, recreation is perhaps the most important non-timber service provided by forests.

According to 2019 Forest Statistics published by the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine,

there are over 30m visits to Irish forests each year, and the estimated value of forest recreation in Ireland is €179m per annum. The State's open forestry policy ensures Coillte and the National Parks and Wildlife Service welcome the general public to state-owned forests. But how can privately-owned forests benefit from this growing demand for recreation?

Recreation in private forests is limited at present, but there is a willingness among many owners, as their forests mature, to develop facilities that will provide income from the forest in addition to timber.

Creating an income from recreation in a privately-owned forest can be challenging. Fáilte Ireland tells us that walking 'tops the poll' as a preferred activity for both the domestic and overseas tourist market. So how can a private forest owner attract visitors to their forest and is it possible to create a business from it?

Walkers are rarely willing to pay to walk – however, they do require other services such as quality accommodation, wholesome food and other activities.

Fáilte Ireland estimates that tourists spend 30% of their budget on accommodation, 34% on food and 7% on activities (the rest is made up of shopping and travel), so if a forest recreation area is combined with another service, this may create a model for a successful enterprise.

Very often, existing forests are developed for recreation either as



an attraction in its own right or in conjunction with other features or services.

However, ideally if a new forest is planted with recreation in mind, there is great opportunity to design and plan the forest to facilitate its future use. One good example of planning a forest with visitors in mind is Rockview Walkways in Co Laois.

The Deevy family farm, a 20ha drystock farm near Ballyroan in Co Laois. In 2008, they planted an 8.1ha block of the farm under the Forestry Environmental Protection Scheme (FEPS). FEPS allowed the establishment of high nature-value woodland while also allowing extra area for



recreational areas of the site were enhanced.

In 2010, the path system was finished with a hard-core surface. Picnic tables and benches were installed, wooden bridges were erected, a small car park was developed and 'Rock-view Walkways' was established. The site is fully wheelchair accessible.



Since then, a sensory garden has been developed on an additional 0.6ha plot and an old farm shed has been converted into a 'rambling house'.

This site is now open and accessible to the public. This example shows that with careful planning, a forest can be both managed for timber production and also facilitate recreational access.

If you want to learn more about forest recreational opportunities, contact your local Teagasc Forestry advisor. Subject to Government health guidelines, Teagasc plan to run a series of walks on forest recreation later in the year. Registration will be necessary prior to each event. Keep an eye on the events calendar at www.teagasc.ie/forestry and local press for details. Alternatively, sign up for our Teagasc forestry e-newsletter to be contacted directly about events and other forestry news.

» Experience from Japan

The term Shinrin-yoku was coined by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries in 1982, and can be defined as 'making contact with and taking in the atmosphere of the forest'.

Researcher Yoshifumi Miyazaki wanted to establish if there were genuine health benefits from spending time in forests. He conducted experiments that measured blood pressure and cortisol levels in the blood and saliva of adults who had spent time walking in 24 Japanese forests.

Results indicated that walking in the woods is good for you, reducing blood pressure and other signs of stress.

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open space. The Deevy family not only wanted a forest, they wanted a recreational woodland.

As the land was moderately flat with some peaty soil leading up to gentle slopes with some mineral soils, the opportunity to plant a range of species was taken. The main species planted were Oak, Ash and Norway spruce, which were planted in blocks with timber production in mind (the ash has recently been thinned).

These individual blocks were supplemented by species such as hazel, rowan, holly, birch, crab apple, Scots pine and others, planted either in groups or individually along edges or in strategic locations to enhance the

beauty of the site.

The forest and the open space was planned and designed to facilitate access for recreational and amenity use. Together with John O'Connell, their consultant forester, they designed a 1.7km path that meandered throughout the woodland, connecting all the various tree species.

The family are closely connected with *Laois Friends*, a volunteer group set up to provide social and recreational opportunities for the people of the community and in particular those with special needs.

Through support from the HSE and other community groups and Leader funding from Laois Partnership, the