



Finding the common ground

by **Andrew Heald**

What does a pink yacht, a David Attenborough documentary and new National Geographic short film about plantations have in common. I think they show that there has been a significant shift in the public attitude towards tackling climate change, and in particular the role of forests and plantations.

The actions of Extinction Rebellion in recent weeks, have moved the urgency and the “why” of tackling climate change up the agenda but that has gone hand-in-hand with an increasing focus on the “how”.

The David Attenborough documentary was part of a new series for Netflix and the episode which featured forests also mentioned the importance of ‘farming trees’ to reduce the harvesting pressure on natural forests and the need to use more timber in construction.

This represents a significant shift in the narrative around plantations, and was the result of work developed by the WWF New Generation Plantations (NGP) team. The NGP approach to sustainable plantations has been developed over the last 10 years by WWF, working closely with large forestry companies such as Mondi, Fibria and UPM plus the Chinese Government and the UK’s Forestry Commission.

The short film from Uganda was made last year on an NGP Study Tour with New Forest Company; Uganda is suffering from very high rates of deforestation and has an urgent need to find more sustainable way to support its growing population with timber and fuel.

I’ve worked closely with NGP for several years and I help to coordinate their study tours and provide plantation management advice in the core team. There are some key lessons from NGP for UK forestry, and which I think would help us communicate better and improve the acceptability of plantation expansion.

The biggest lesson is to identify the problem. Very often we spend time arguing about solutions when we haven’t clarified the problem that we are trying to fix. Climate change is THE major issue, driven in part by deforestation and also by our consumption of non-renewable materials and use of fossil fuels.

In NGP we spend a lot of time on thinking about the questions that we are trying to answer. For example:

The UK has an urgent need for more homes, the target is 300,000 new homes every year.

How do we build these new homes with the low-

est environmental footprint, with a shrinking skilled labour force and with increasingly unpredictable weather?

One of the answers is more timber frame and more offsite construction. That inevitably means an increased demand for softwood timber, so the next question might be ...

Where should that timber come from and how can we ensure that those forests are being well managed?

We can then have a conversation about local vs imported timber and about sustainability and certification.

By asking questions and really listening to the answers, we can demonstrate that we are trying to better understand the problems and we can also find areas of common understanding.

If *How do we tackle climate change?* is the biggest question of all, the second biggest is *How do we adapt to the likely impacts of climate change?*

Well managed forests and sustainable timber are part of the answers to both these questions. The regular reports from the Committee Climate Change reinforce this message, calling for 30,000ha of afforestation each year and a shift away from concrete in construction. As foresters and timber processors we are part of the solution to these massive challenges.

However, we can’t just point out at a new Spruce plantation and expect people to say thank you. We need to work much harder on our empathy skills, and we need to demonstrate that we are really listening to people’s questions and concerns. We need to ask those questions, and find the common ground and take people on the journey from Sitka sceptics to conifer converts.

<https://newgenerationplantations.org>



On their own, natural forests can’t provide all the wood we need

David Attenborough

FTN WEB RESOURCES



Watch: David Attenborough – How to save our forests and rewild our planet

Find more links to:

National Geographic video: Plantations in Uganda

Net Zero report by the Committee on Climate Change

Extinction Rebellion campaign

www.confor.org.uk/ftnweb