



THE ART OF NATURAL FOREST PRACTICE

My Personal Journey in the woodland

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WHY DO MANY PEOPLE DO NOTHING WITH THEIR WOODLAND?

My name is Iliff Simey. I see woodland (and forest) as the most beautiful thing to have evolved on this planet- for it's rich, diverse, complex, dynamic and readily accessible to us. I live surrounded by my woodland, a woodland that turns out on better acquaintance to be very special. It has become part of my life and has cared for me through much of life's turmoil. I took over from my father 40 years ago and he from his father who acquired the valley. They both recognised its



intrinsic beauty as an escape, providing refreshment from the stressful life of the modern world.

My grandfather acquired the valley after the big timber trees had all been felled at the end of the First World War. The valley had been abandoned as

waste. It was devastated and neglected, perhaps for the first time in its history since prehistoric man first began clearing the ancient wildwood. Medieval man would be heart broken to see this, for no longer is it an integral part of a local self-sustaining economy. 500 years-a-go the local woodlands must have been very productive. The village church for example (Cilcain) has a fine medieval roof acquired shortly after Henry dissolved the monasteries, and the door, the panels of which are cut from a single quarter-saw plank of oak indicating a tree of a size that no longer exists locally. We could not now construct such a roof for there are far too few oak trees locally and they are of poor quality.

My mother, as a teenager remembers the wild flowers as prolific, when light flooded the woodland stimulating new growth. No one advised my grandfather how to give nature a helping hand accelerating its recovery by selecting young trees to grow-on. Thus a unique opportunity was missed to restore the woodland and it became a tangled mess of scrubby, spindly trees growing like match-sticks of no commercial value and declining worth to fauna and flora. At that time the intrinsic value of the *Ancient Woodland* was unrecognised by all but a few botanists and the land was generally regarded as waste. My father, post Second World War was advised to plant quick growing conifers, for the political emphasis was on replenishing home-grown timber stocks grossly depleted by the war. I in my turn felt uneasy about this, there had to be an alternative but as forestry in Wales at that time was entirely focused on



conifers I had to seek inspiration elsewhere. So we went on forestry visits to the beech woods of the Chilterns. There we met foresters talking about natural regeneration of the beech, and, oh yes they said- the same techniques could be used with oak, ash, indeed all native broadleaves! So we returned to Coed Nant Gain, but it was not so easy. There was no-one locally to advice us; such as we had emphasised keeping the forest clean and so we burnt all decaying wood. We went two steps forward and 3 back; we didn't know what to do next. The woodland was worse off than before we started. In my first 25 years progress in restoring the

woodland was minimal and misguided.

It was not until we met-up with the new Woodland Grant Scheme run by the government Forestry Commission, that professional advice was available for the first time appropriate to my ancient woodland. In the next five years we made more progress than the previous 25! I felt uneasy however. The forester talked of birds but the advice was tree focussed. I knew nothing of the lichens, insects were things that bit and fungi attacked trees. Slowly it dawned on me that the forest was more than trees; trees were really the scaffold on which everything hung, thus when we cut one tree we changed the balance of the surroundings, not just of the trees but also of the shrubs, wild flowers and seedlings.

Somewhere in the midst of all this were insects that things like *flycatchers* and bats were eating! It was a big puzzle to me how they all co-existed. By the text book for example Honey fungus should have long ago killed off all the trees.

In due course I spent five months camping in the forests of the American Pacific Northwest. There I met *Ecoforesters* and made my next big leap forward. I had not heard of *Ecoforestry* before and so it made a significant impact on me. Basically *Ecoforesters* are opposed to clear cutting the forest, selecting their trees for felling so that as the forest matures the remaining timber volume is constantly increasing (read- *Wildwood: A Forest for the Future* by Ruth Loomis and Merv



Wilkinson). I visited some of the remaining unlogged old-growth coniferous forests that survived (requiring a guide to locate so hidden away are they). Here I saw at first-hand how when nature is in charge the forest is so rich, diverse, dynamic, and complex. In five months I thus took a giant leap forward.

Returning home to my woodland, I began slowly to view it through eyes attuned to trees three or more times the size of anything growing in Britain. I realised that the pathetic amount of decaying wood in my woodland, more perhaps than most other woods in Britain, was a fraction of

what nature requires in a healthy woodland. Mine was lacking in standing trunks, of larger diameters of say 20"/ 50cms (research in Oregon indicates 26 to the acre), a tangle of branches on the forest floor, in the tree and more. I began asking myself- why is this necessary? By learning how to observe at first hand in the forest I began to appreciate the significance of decay in recycling the forest; providing food for a diversity of birds, mammals and insects, nutrient rich seed beds to regenerate the flora, supporting a network of fungi, and much more, all crucial to the health of the forest.

In my lifetime I observe that the countryside is being denuded of trees. Many roadside and hedgerow trees have disappeared, field copses grazed out and virtually eliminated, the associated richness largely gone and the woodlands in very poor health. As a consequence I no longer walk the countryside I know for I find this loss too painful to witness.

So what is wrong with our lack of comprehension?

How is it that people find it so difficult to see the forest as a whole, a living community rather more than a bunch of trees? Why is it that people are unable to appreciate that our abuse over two millennia and more has left the forests seriously depleted and that nature has great need of a helping hand to restore its natural beauty?

The 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth graphically draws our attention to the richness, diversity, vibrancy and complexity of the natural forest. We have not before thought of this as a community that is self-supporting, self-regulating and self-perpetuating. In fact the forest is remarkably similar to our own society, for we function as communities and have experienced for ourselves how these work.



My old-growth ancient woodland in Wales, because it has been there since the retreat of the ice-age 12 millennia ago, has thus become a visual aid of immense value in which nature is demonstrating to us how the natural forest works. This may seem obvious, but in practice we will only begin to comprehend if we do as Darwin did and learn anew how to observe, leaving all our preconceptions outside the forest gate, sit down, relax and let the forest speak to us.

THE IDEAS CONTAINED HERE ARE IN DRAFT, INCOMPLETE AND DEVELOPING.
THE BENEFIT OF YOUR COMMENTS, EXPERIENCE, OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS
WILL THEREFORE BE MOST WELCOME IN DEVELOPING THE IDEA.

A PASSION FOR RESTORING NATURAL FORESTS

This paper was inspired by and looking at natural forests

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