



## Decolonising forestry: relinking forests and people through community forestry

*Within community forestry a 'use it or lose it' approach is best, argues Peter O'Hara.*

Before discussing the 'relinking' of people and forests through community forestry, it is important to understand where the 'delinking' paradigm, superimposed onto Tanzania and elsewhere during colonial times, originated from. The separation of people and nature has deep rooted conceptual origins, for example early Judaeo-Christian texts explicitly framed humans as exceptional and separate from nature as opposed to many animist religions that placed humans within nature. The conceptual separation is particularly strong in Europe, as reflected in the origins of certain words, with the Latin word *forestis* originating from a meaning of 'outside', as in a wild

FORVAC also supported a wide range of forest enterprises led by women, including honey, mushrooms and craft. All photos: FORVAC.

place outside human control. Such 'wild places' later became the hunting reserves of elites in Europe in the form of exclusionary Royal Forests, 'commoners' were kept out. A few centuries later, during the period of Enlightenment and into industrialisation and urbanisation, livelihoods in countries like Britain are further delinked from nature. The division between people and nature has become so heavily engrained in modern industrialised society that 'wilderness' has attained a romantic idealisation.

### Fortress conservation

One of the most notable and influential romantic wilderness lovers was the 19th century Scottish-born conservationist, John Muir. He poetically described how he found sanctuary from the man-made world

in 'wild places' and helped start a movement to preserve those wild places in North America, leading to the creation of national parks. Although his opinions changed somewhat in later life, Muir's early views on nature being separate from humans were clear: "The landscape of the Sierra Cathedral Mountains... was a place that was pure wilderness and where no mark of man is visible upon it". Of Native Americans, Muir wrote they were "most ugly, and some of them altogether hideous, they seemed to have no right place in the landscape". He espoused using force to protect forests from people, "the best service in forest protection—almost the only efficient service—is that rendered by the military" [1]. The idea of an enforced exclusionary approach to nature conservation had strong political backing in the USA

and the idea took hold internationally at the same time as colonial expansion. John Muir's ideas helped inspire the birth and spread of what is today termed 'fortress conservation'.

Even in John Muir's time, there was not universal belief in the idea that kicking indigenous people out would necessarily be good for the forests. The US Forest Service at the time argued that the customary management techniques had been beneficial "when the Indians were Commissioners" [1]. This view has been subsequently vindicated, for example destructive forest fires in many parts of the world are being partly attributed to bans on customary management practices under exclusionary fortress conservation approaches. A study of the impact of the exclusionary approach espoused by Muir in Yosemite National Park, based on a comprehensive inventory, vegetative sampling and tree core sampling techniques, found that biodiversity had significantly declined due largely to a century without customary management by Native Americans. Trees were now 20 percent smaller on average and the forests were much denser and made up of fewer species, with much previous ground flora and meadows missing [2].

The introduction of fortress conservation might have preserved little islands of forest in national parks and state reserves guarded from local people, albeit without the benefits of customary management, but it had a disastrous impact on the forests beyond, and on the relationship between people and forests as a whole [3]. The idea that drove fortress conservation, that local people are a threat to forests, became a self-fulfilling prophecy; as customary rights were undermined, so too was customary stewardship, speeding up forest destruction around the world.

### Community forestry

Community forestry has emerged in recent decades in response to the realisation that local people need to be engaged in the management of their local forests, not alienated from them. Community forestry recognises that when communities are granted rights over local forest commons, they will regulate, use and manage the resources sustainably [4]. Community forestry has grown considerably with around 28 per cent of the world's natural forests under some degree of community control [5] and has a proven track record as a socially acceptable way to incentivise sustainable forest management with

better biodiversity outcomes than many strictly reserved forests.

In the early 1990s, Tanzania became one of the pioneers of community forestry in Africa and today around 45 per cent of the natural forests are under some degree of community control.

The handover process from state to communities involves mapping out customary forest boundaries, granting secure tenure to communities and devolving a legally recognised balance of rights and

responsibilities over the forest to communities. Conditions are attached to the ownership transfer, including that the forests cannot be cleared and their use must be sustainable. It has increasingly been recognised that responsibilities must be matched with benefits.

To help community forests pay their way, a joint programme was implemented from 2018 to 2024 called the Forestry and Value Chains Development Programme (FORVAC), set up between the Governments of Finland and Tanzania [6]. Both Finland and Tanzania have a decades long history of collaboration in forestry, and have in some ways a similar forest governance history. Both were under foreign rule in the past with the forest resources placed under top-down state control. After independence the Finnish government devolved most forest ownership to rural dwellers, so that today 60 per cent of the forests are owned by private individuals, mainly smallholders, around 620,000 forest owners in total. These privately owned forests produce 80 per cent of the country's timber. Finland's forest sector is considered one of the most successful in the world, both in terms of generating significant income—generating around 20 billion Euros in 2022—hand in hand with expanding forest cover and improving forest biodiversity. Forests now cover 74 per cent of the land. There is a much less rigid dichotomy between 'productive' or 'environmental' forestry in Finland, compared to Scotland. Rather it is both productive and environmental forestry with local people and their livelihoods at the centre of the country's forest management strategy, an approach that Tanzania is keen to emulate through community forestry.

Since 2018, FORVAC has supported 128 communities to take ownership of, and sustainably manage, 470,000 hectares of Miombo woodlands. The programme then supported the incubation of 180 forest-related enterprises in the communities, which involved 1,500 entrepreneurs, some of whom had been previously working informally in forestry-related activities. All businesses had to be based on Sustainable Forest Management principles and included timber merchants, mobile sawmilling



Miombo woodland thrives on disturbance, creating a vibrant regenerating woodland.

operations, timber drying operations, carpentry workshops, craft workers, beekeepers, forest mushroom collectors and other forest product-based enterprises.

**Forests that pay**

Since 2020, the forest-based enterprises have generated around five million Euro profit, with the highly profitable timber businesses paying 60 per cent of the profit share into a social fund for the participating villages. This has been used to establish schools, health centres and support for the most vulnerable. The remaining 40 per cent is invested in business development and forest management activities.

Harvesting of timber is done in selective felling operations based on a calculated Annual Allowable Cut (AAC), which allows felling of a maximum of about one mature tree per hectare per year. Miombo woodland thrives on disturbance; the ecosystem has developed with the likes of elephants crashing through, and seedlings taking advantage of openings in the canopy to shoot up and fill the gap. There is no need to replenish by tree planting. Communities have so far harvested no more than seven per cent of the potential AAC despite predictions by some professionals in government



and conservation organisations that handing forests to ‘poor’ villagers, allowing them to harvest timber and obtain sawmills would lead to outright forest destruction.

Evidence has shown the opposite to be the case. Satellite-based forest monitoring suggests that on average since 2018, the 470,000 hectares of community forests supported by FORVAC had deforestation rates seven times lower than comparable government-managed forests. Within the community forests there was a direct correlation between timber harvesting revenue and deforestation rates—those with the highest income from timber had the lowest, almost zero, deforestation. These communities have shown the highest motivation to protect and sustainably manage their forests.

Top: Community members processing sustainably harvested wood to add value. Deforestation is lowest in community forests generating the most income.

Left: Lose a tree to save a forest, financial returns from sustainable timber harvesting lowers pressure to convert the forest to other land uses.

When forests were placed under community control and the communities were provided the rights to commercially harvest the forests and add value, it was clear that the ‘forest that pays, is the forest that stays’. Very importantly, by transferring secure forest tenure and creating an economically attractive model, community forestry scaled up rapidly in a demand driven and socially acceptable way—there were no evictions or government forest guards needed. In a few years, 470,000 hectares of forests were brought under sustainable community management. That is equivalent to the size of the Scottish Borders and there was a demand from many other communities to scale up community forestry for them also. In a previous pilot in Zambia, also supported by the Finnish Government, community forestry has grown since 2016 to cover 4.5 million hectares, equivalent to more than half the area of Scotland. If the model had been ecologically attractive, but had not been financially attractive to local people, there would have been nowhere near the same ecological impact compared to what financially attractive community forestry has achieved at scale.

**Muir’s legacy revisited**

Despite such evidence-based success in Tanzania, Zambia and in many other places, Muir’s exclusionary approach



is winning, fortress conservation is in resurgence and community forestry is under threat. Why does fortress conservation continue to thrive whereas community forestry struggles? If we learnt anything from colonial conservation approaches, it is that the West must not superimpose its vision onto communities and forests in the Global South, a vision that creates a false division between people and nature. Yet that is exactly what is happening today, with a huge resurgence in exclusionary fortress conservation approaches, based on Western visions of nature needing to be peopleless, and fuelled by North to South climate finance. We need a root and branch decolonisation of international conservation, and should start by decolonising our own Eurocentric mindsets, unlearning some of the heavily engrained myths about the relationship between people and the rest of nature. As part of this unlearning, there is a need for a revisionist look at the legacy of John Muir and his ilk on international conservation approaches. On one side of the coin Muir did help create national parks and a love of 'wilderness', but the other side of the coin is that he helped create fortress conservation. This approach has shaken and sometimes irreparably broken the customary bonds between people and nature and millions more forest dependent peoples are currently facing eviction because of an expansion in protected areas.

It is quite ironic that Muir's love of pristine nature was not inspired by

'untrammelled' peopleless nature at all, as he thought at the time. The vistas of towering trees around biodiverse rich meadows that inspired him were very much the product of stewardship by what he referred to as the 'hideous' Native Americans that he felt had no place in the landscape at all. Muir had in fact completely misread the landscape. He actually witnessed what community forestry in places like Tanzania proves, that people and nature can not only coexist, they can both thrive together if provided with the opportunity and right conditions to do so.

### Lessons for Scotland

What do the lessons from international community forestry mean for Scotland? Well first of all Scotland starts from a very different baseline than countries like Tanzania or Finland, in terms of ecological degradation, overgrazing, rural depopulation and historically undermined forest culture. As in Tanzania and Finland, Scotland would need meaningful land reform processes combined with making small-scale forestry more economically attractive to rural dwellers, as well as a rekindling of forest culture. I also believe Scotland needs to overcome its own conceptual and practical separation of people and nature which is holding back the forestry potential. If forestry in Scotland was untrammelled by the rigid division between 'productive' and 'environmental' forestry it would help bring more diverse forests back at scale more quickly.

### References

1. Johnson, E. M. (2014). *How John Muir's brand of conservation led to the decline of Yosemite*. Published in Scientific American's former blog network. [tinyurl.com/JM-Yosemite](http://tinyurl.com/JM-Yosemite)
2. Scholl, A. E., & Taylor, A. H. (2010). Fire regimes, forest change, and self-organization in an old-growth mixed conifer forest, Yosemite National Park, USA. *Ecological Applications*, 20(2), 362–380.
3. Adams, J. S., & McShane, T. O. (1992). *The myth of wild Africa: conservation without illusion*. University of California Press.
4. Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.
5. Rights and Resources Initiative. (2014). *What future for reform? Progress and slowdown in forest tenure reform since 2002*. Rights and Resources Initiative. [tinyurl.com/Rights-Resources](http://tinyurl.com/Rights-Resources)
6. Forest and Value Chains Programme (2024). *Final Report of FORVAC*. Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, Tanzania, and the Department of Foreign Affairs Finland. [tinyurl.com/Forvac-report](http://tinyurl.com/Forvac-report)

*Dr Peter O'Hara has worked internationally with community forestry for 30 years and was the Chief Technical Advisor of the FORVAC programme in Tanzania. A video link which tells the story of FORVAC support to community forestry in Tanzania can be found at [tinyurl.com/Forvac-story](http://tinyurl.com/Forvac-story).*

Peter with one of the community forest management groups, in Ruangwa District, Lindi region, Tanzania.

