# Social studies of rural communities and private sector woodland creation in south Scotland – two Masters theses from the University of Copenhagen

Two students from the University of Copenhagen were hosted by the Centre for Mountain Studies last summer. They had contacted Professor Anna Lawrence to ask for support in developing their dissertation work for their Masters degrees, in response to her research on [communities’ experience of engaging with new forestry planting](https://www.forestpolicygroup.org/blog/communities-experiences-of-new-forest-planting-applications-in-scotland-the-final-report/) and [potential for more community benefits](https://www.southofscotlandenterprise.com/news/communitywoodlandstudy), particularly in the southern uplands of Scotland. Anna welcomed the opportunity for new perspectives from students with experience of continental Europe. She put them in touch with community organisations and groups in the Borders and in Galloway – regions which are much less represented in studies of community land management.

Both students chose situations where private landowners had planted, or proposed to plant, new woodland (of which the majority was conifer plantation), and to bring specific theoretical frameworks and research methods to bear on those experiences. We helped them to meet stakeholders, and then stepped aside to allow them to bring their own interpretation to what they found.

They’ve prepared summaries of their theses, which are available below. Congratulations to Sophie and Laura on attaining their Masters degrees.

# Differences in stakeholder perceptions on woodland creation in south Scotland: A case study on sources of tension and possibilities for progress

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Summary

The Scottish Government has a policy target to increase woodland cover to deliver climate mitigation and adaptation, restoration of lost habitats, and supporting rural development. This large-scale land use change is particularly rapid in rural areas in the south of Scotland, where increased commercial plantations are cause for concern amongst communities living in the affected landscapes. In many places this has led to tensions and protests against individual planting schemes and the overall development.

In summer 2023, one particular case in south Scotland was researched by Sophie Zeller, a Master’s student from Copenhagen University in Denmark for her final thesis-project. She aimed to assess how the situation was perceived by different stakeholders involved in and affected by the proposed planting. Additionally, she assessed the role of power dynamics and opportunities for improvement of the situation. She conducted interviews with representatives of several relevant stakeholder groups: an agent for the landowner, the forest management company, members of the local community and farmers. However, for logistical reasons, she was not able to include important perspectives by actors such as Scottish Forestry, and local businesses such as forestry contractors. The study keeps the interviewees and the name of the particular case anonymous. The area lies in the south Scotland conservancy and is affected by new woodland creation, especially commercial conifer plantations. The planting proposal was one of several planting projects in the surrounding area.

She used the analytical framework, the ‘progress triangle’[[1]](#footnote-1) for organising the research. Using this framework, she categorised the situation into the three dimensions of relationship, procedure and substance. In the ‘substance’ dimension, the more concrete, material issues as seen by the different stakeholders were identified. These are the concrete aspects of agreement and disagreement, for example how the planting proposal was viewed by the different parties, and includes issues like the choice of tree species. In situations like this, issues at the ‘substance’ dimension are often the primary aspects of debate. However, in many cases these aspects are strongly influenced by the relationship between parties, or matters of decision making processes. The ‘relationship’ dimension refers to understanding who is involved in a situation, and the relational histories between those parties, and poses the opportunity to assess levels of trust and power dynamics. Within the ‘procedure’ dimension, the logistics of the decision-making processes in the situation were assessed, looking at jurisdiction, resources, and processes such as the community engagement. This framework emphasises the interrelation of the dimensions and the notion of progress. Hence, the focus lies less on the end goals of the individual parties, but on improving the conditions within different dimensions related to a situation.

The results showed that all dimensions were relevant to all interviewed stakeholder groups:

The stakeholder groups supporting the planting project, the landowner and the forest management, described key issues within the relationship dimension. For example, they perceived interactions with local communities in other development cases in south Scotland often as hostile and discomforting, leading to a sense of distrust. The interaction in this specific case was perceived as less hostile but still tense. At the procedural level, they described issues with slow and laborious planting application processes, and challenges with time, workload, and resource constraints. They perceived these aspects as causing misunderstandings about the specific planting proposal, pointing out their willingness to plan for community benefit, and managing land responsibly.

Community members and farmers were the two stakeholder groups opposing the planting project and shared many of each other’s viewpoints. It became clear that those groups did not oppose woodland creation per se, but instead saw strong issues in the way it is implemented. Key issues ranged from national to local scale. Importantly, many participants saw their experiences at local scale as driven by large scale developments. At large scale, they pointed to issues with policies surrounding land ownership structures and land sales, the Forestry Grant Scheme, and the cumulative impact on livelihoods in the region, farming and heritage. At local scale, many issues were seen for example with the planting area as a unique and important place to the community, environmental aspects, the choice of tree species and the large scale at which change is happening in the surrounding area. Importantly, opinions over these concrete aspects of the development in the substance dimension were influenced by aspects at procedural level, such as the lack of clarity regarding planning processes, transparency, and perceived lack of adequate community engagement, and relationship issues such as the lack of meaningful relationships with both local project developers and Governmental agencies, perceived dismissiveness, disrespect, and lack of influence. Historical aspects, such as negative experiences from past afforestation developments in the sixties and seventies in the wider region, as well as examples of current afforestation projects in the area also led to distrust towards the proposed afforestation. Community members and farmers also experienced a strong lack of power compared to other stakeholders such as the landowner, the forest management, and Scottish Forestry. Again, these experiences negatively impacted the level of trust towards the project. The perceived power imbalances were seen as especially problematic due to the wider issues with land sales, regarding who can own how much land. Additionally, the dependency of tenant farmers on landowners was raised as an important issue, leading to the perception that tenant farmers were restricted to openly object against planting projects in this and other afforestation cases.

As for this aspect, all stakeholder groups saw issues to be rooted in national scale developments and regulations, but also for the specific planting project at local scale, due to the importance of the specific area to locals. While some community members, and the forest management discussed issues for the specific planting proposal of the case, other community members, farmers, and the landowner often referred to the larger context of large-scale land use change in the region. The results showed that opposition and tensions between project developers and local communities have complex and interrelated causes which could be addressed at different dimensions and scales, and by different parties. This also shows the role of governmental entities for this and other cases of woodland creation in the region.

The research aimed at identifying key areas for improvement of the situation. The challenges in the relationship dimension were identified as crucial and the research suggests that addressing them is a high priority. Possibilities for improvement at this level include building relationships and trust, and addressing power imbalances, which would be especially useful at local scale. Importantly, forest developers should tackle issues of communication and lack of transparency by providing understandable information and responding to community inquiries timely to address issues of trust and power. The willingness of decision makers to share their power becomes an important aspect and could induce more collaborative processes.

Collaborative approaches can lead to improved outcomes for all stakeholders, including the landowner, and lower the risk of public resistance and loss of reputation. Collaboration poses opportunities for fair decision-making processes that allow the exploration of mutual benefit for involved and affected parties. This is in line with governmental policy, as the Scottish Government aims for more collaborative approaches in decisions about land, especially for long term and significant changes in an area[[2]](#footnote-2). However, the research showed that the demand for improved community engagement, especially by actors in low power positions, was a significant issue, and current engagement processes do not meet these Governmental aims. It is important to develop decision making processes in collaboration with communities and other stakeholders. Engagement events could become more inclusive by meeting different stakeholders’ time constraints, for example by allocating more than one day for the event per community. Developing a shared understanding of the situation and tackling misunderstanding over the existing plans could be reached by visits to the area, characterised by meaningful dialogue over possibilities of planting proposals. Mutual invitations to the planting area could pose a useful way for this, can lead to improved relationships and trust, and address power issues. Fair decision making processes need to include underrepresented groups such as tenant farmers. Additionally, dealing with issues over community benefits should go beyond communicating existing benefits, but explore the increase of community benefits in collaboration with locals. Hence, instead of only hosting drop-in events where individual comments are collected, a community meeting could bring together different stakeholders at the same time for a dialogue over the situation.

The implementation of community engagement largely depends on landowners, forest management companies and agents. The research highlighted challenges for workload and resources for both project developers and communities, who are using their free time to engage. The research identified possible solutions to these issues, including**:** clear guidance by the regulatory body, Scottish Forestry**; s**upport for skill development, such as training in collaborative methods for forest developers**;** andproviding funding to supporting more collaborative approaches through the FGS revision in 2024.

As pointed out by all stakeholder groups, issues seen at local scale were strongly embedded in national scale developments. This highlights the responsibility of the Scottish Government, and the regulatory body, Scottish Forestry, to foster and support just processes for decision making. Hence, addressing the issues seen with large scale policy mechanisms regarding land ownership, and the revision of the FGS pose important opportunities to address procedural and substantial aspects at larger scale. This includes more integrated landscape level planning, and requires increased clarity and transparency over local, and regional land use change, as well as more collaborative approaches both by landowners, and governmental entities.

# Title: Exploration of Community Members' Plural Values: A Case Study of Woodland Creation in Waterside Hill

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Summary

The study investigates community members' values and meanings and their complex interplay in the case of a woodland creation project in Waterside Hill located next to St. John’s Town of Dalry in South Scotland. The values and meanings of community members are complemented by the views of a representative of Scottish Forestry and a former employee of the landowner who were involved in the woodland creation project. The case is contextualized within the broader efforts to combat climate change through afforestation, often sparking green-on-green debates where environmental interests and arguments on opposite sides conflict. The debate is explored in the context of Scotland, where objectives of woodland creation aim for both climate mitigation and economic growth.

The meanings and values are explored through a theoretical framework of plural values, including direct and indirect instrumental, intrinsic, and relational values. Instrumental values refer to values in nature as means to achieve a desired outcome, whereas intrinsic values view the value in nature itself. The two have long formed a dichotomy, and relational values have been the most recent addition, referring to the value of relationships and responsibilities between nature and humans. Additionally, the place-based meanings of relational values are specifically captured through the concept of sense of place (SOP). Relational values are emphasised in the study as the most recent additional concept. The framework enables to examine how these values are present and overlap, interact, and conflict in the context of woodland creation, through the case study of Waterside Hill. A research gap is identified in previous research on plural values in woodland creation projects comparable to the context of Scotland, as well as studies on the case of Waterside Hill. The study contributes to this gap by exploring community members’ values and meanings and their better integration into the woodland creation projects.

The study uses qualitative research methods for data gathering and analysis. In total, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 11 with community members, one with a representative from Scottish Forestry, and one with a former landowner's employee. The participants from the community consisted of people with some kind of meaning or value to Waterside Hill and views of the woodland creation project. The data was analysed through stages of thematic analysis using inductive coding. Further, research ethics were considered throughout the thesis, including participants' free, prior, and informed consent for their participation in the study, guarantee of anonymity, storage of research data and sharing of the final study.

The study outlines the findings through the themes determined based on the theoretical framework of plural values. Direct instrumental values illustrate the objectives, interests and uses of the forestry sector and landowner through themes of financial benefits and job creation, climate targets, and the landowner’s use of the land. Indirect instrumental values, on the other hand, reflect community members' meanings and values regarding the use of the hill through recreation and agriculture. Intrinsic values expressed by the community members highlight care and appreciation of biodiversity and ecology and concerns over negative impacts on the nature of Waterside Hill and the surrounding area. Further, relational values, most expressed by the community members, illustrate aspects of aesthetics, history, culture, attachment, uniqueness, and personal memories in which the place-based meanings explored through SOP are present.

The values and meanings expressed by the community members are varied in their degree and emphasis. Nonetheless, the majority of the community members discussed similar meanings, values, and views on Waterside Hill and the related woodland creation project, which are complemented by the views of the representative of Scottish Forestry and the former employee of the landowner. The key findings illustrate the dynamic presence and interaction of plural values in the woodland creation project on Waterside Hill. First, the woodland creation project is found to emphasise indirect instrumental values through the financial benefits gained from it through grants paid for the landowner and future timber production, as well as climate targets aimed at climate mitigation through efficient planting of Sitka spruce. Intrinsic values can be seen as visible in the project through environmental impact assessment; however, in terms of the instrumental-intrinsic dichotomy, the woodland creation clearly emphasises instrumental values.

Second, along the lines of instrumental-intrinsic dichotomy, community members' emphasis on direct instrumental values of recreation and agriculture can be seen to conflict with their emphasis on intrinsic values, like concerns over negative impacts on nature. Nonetheless, although contradictions are evident, for the majority of community members, the recreational and agricultural use of land was strongly connected to their intrinsic and relational valuation of nature. This finding highlights the overlapping, intersecting, and conflicting nature of plural values.

Third, the findings most prominently illustrate how relational values lack recognition, understanding, and integration in the woodland creation project. The variety of relational values and meanings expressed, from attachment to the nature and view of the Hill to cultural significance of an oral story and a related ancient piece on the Hill, to personal memories and historical meanings, were according to community experience left under the radar in the woodland creation project. The relational values and meanings are further emphasised through their place-based nature explored through SOP. These findings underscore the necessity of plural valuation values in woodland creation, including relational values.

Lastly, the findings highlight the intrinsic complexity of plural values and their recognition, understanding, and integration into woodland creation projects. Besides policies and regulations of woodland creation, the character of the plural values influences their recognition and integration. Instrumental values are generally tangible and negotiable. Intrinsic values are mandatory to consider, at least to a certain extent, through environmental regulation. Relational values, on the other hand, are often nontangible, personal, and hence non-negotiable. In addition plural values, overlaps, interactions and conflicts make their lines blurry. Such factors can hinder the recognition, understanding, and integration of plural values.

In conclusion, the study underscores the necessity for plural values to receive adequate recognition, understanding, and integration in woodland creation while acknowledging the immense complexity of such a task requiring fundamental changes in mindsets, policies, and regulations. Despite the valuable insights the study provides, it also acknowledges some limitations and emphasizes the need for future research. Approaches for future studies, such as quantitative survey studies and focus group discussions, are suggested as beneficial for exploring the broader and deeper scope of plural values and meanings. Further, potential tools for future research are also highlighted, including the IPBES conceptual framework of plural values and the Nature Futures Framework.

1. Daniels, S. E., & Walker, G. B. (2001). Working Through Environmental Conflict. The Collaborative Learning Approach. PRAEGER. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Scottish Government. (2022b). Scottish Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement 2022: advisory notes. https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-land-rights-responsibilities-statement-2022-advisory-notes/pages/10/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)