‘Trees are a national security issue. We’re not planting enough’

The heads of Natural England and the Forestry Commission have come together to call for more conifers to be planted to meet future demand

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Saturday January 10 2026, 4.50pm, The Sunday Times

Climate change

Tony Juniper, left, and Sir William Worsley hold up the Forest of Dean as an example of good management
BRAD WAKEFIELD FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Britain faces running out of timber because the country has stopped planting enough of the trees required for housebuilding, countryside regulators have warned.

The UK ships in 80 per cent of the wood we use each year, making us the world’s second largest net importer of timber behind China.

“This is a matter of national security,” said Tony Juniper, the chair of Natural England. “Wood is a critical resource.”

Timber prices have tripled in the last 20 years and are likely to continue to rise, with global demand projected to quadruple by 2050. Labour’s manifesto pledge to build 1.5 million new homes by the end of the decade will also drive up the need for trees.

Sir William Worsley, chair of the Forestry Commission, said: “I think we’re going to have really bad timber shortages — certainly in ten or 15 years’ time.”
The two environmental leaders, speaking in a rare joint interview in the Forest of Dean, in Gloucestershire, said there is an urgent need to plant more conifers — the evergreen spruce, pine and fir trees used for roofing joists, floorboards and timber framing.

Tree planting has gone out of fashion in recent years, despite woodland covering just 13.5 per cent of the UK landmass, compared with 30 per cent in Germany and 31 per cent in France.

A few years ago, political parties competed to outbid each other to promise more trees. During the 2019 election, the Conservatives under Boris Johnson pledged to plant 30,000 hectares a year — roughly 40 million trees every 12 months — to "enchant and re-energise the soul". Not to be outdone, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour promised two billion new trees by 2040, which would have required three trees to be planted every second, day and night.
"Tree planting was fashionable," Worsley said. "People got very interested and there were all those targets. But at the election last year, not a single party manifesto had anything about tree planting at all."

After the hype of the 2019 election, planting rates crept up from 13,500 hectares to 20,660 in 2024, but fell again last year to 15,600.

Conifers, which take between 20 and 60 years to reach maturity, have been particularly low on the agenda. Worsley said: "In the last ten years we have planted no more than 10 per cent conifers — we think that should be up at 30 per cent."

This is partly because growing conifers for timber has not been valued by many environmentalists, who would rather have seen rewilded landscapes left to regenerate naturally than evergreens planted in orderly rows.

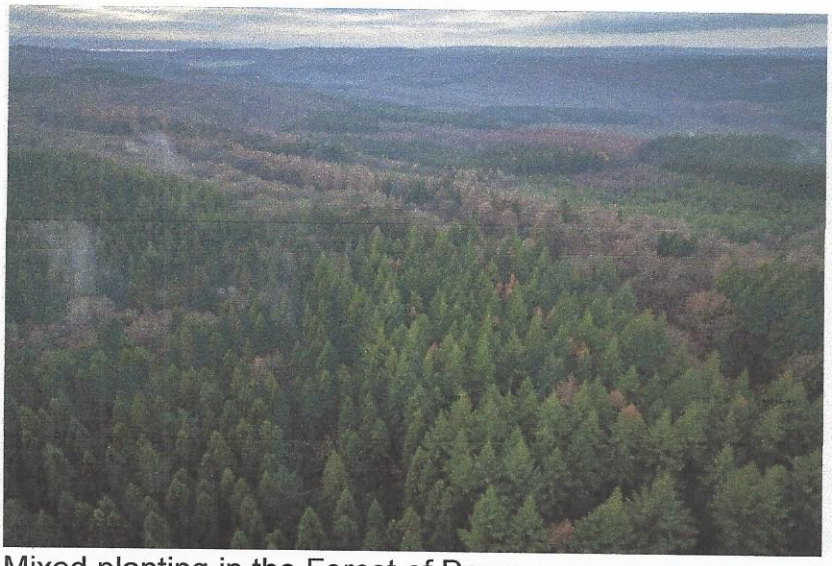
"Conifers have had a bad rep," Worsley said. Conifer plantations for many years were derided as "sitka spruce prison blocks" — a reference to the dark squares of evergreens that still dominate many hillsides, a hangover from the last tree-planting boom in the 1970s.

These coniferous monocultures, many conservationists argue, are bad for biodiversity. And when the trees are felled a block at a time in a sweeping clearance, it leaves a great scar on the landscape. Critics argue that tree planting should instead focus on mixed broadleaf woodlands of oak, ash and chestnut, which are better for wildlife.

But Worsley said this was a prejudice. "We never plant conifers like that now — it's like comparing the Ford Model T to a modern motor car." The swing in favour of planting broadleaf trees for the sake of nature has left us short of the timber we need, he added.

In the past, Natural England, which is in charge of protecting nature and wildlife on behalf of the government, and the Forestry Commission, which manages England's publicly owned forests and regulates private woodlands, have represented opposing ends of this argument.

But they have come to a closer understanding. "We do not agree on everything but one of the things I set out to do when I took on this role [in 2020] was to improve the relationship," Worsley said. On the need for new trees, and conifers in particular, they are now united.



Mixed planting in the Forest of Dean
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One development that has made this easier is modern tree-planting methods, as exemplified by the approach taken in the Forest of Dean, one of the public woodlands managed by the Forestry Commission via its subsidiary, Forestry England.

Here, instead of blocks of trees being felled in great swathes once they come to maturity — a common technique called "clear fell and restock" — the forestry team have for the last 15 years taken a new approach. Under a "continuous canopy cover" strategy, about 20 per cent of trees are selected to be felled for timber every

five to ten years, letting in light and allowing young trees to be replanted in their place.

It can be tricky — highly skilled chainsaw operators are needed to fell huge trees without crushing the saplings below — but is much better for wildlife and the trees themselves. The permanent canopy maintains a stable forest microclimate, sheltering young trees from drought, while the root systems of mature trees help moderate water levels in the soil.

By creating mixed-species, multi-storey stands of trees — a blend of Douglas fir, Norway spruce and western red cedar, as well as broadleaf trees such as oak, beech and alder — the forest is also less vulnerable to storms, pests and disease.

The approach is paying dividends for wildlife. The Forest of Dean is home to England's biggest population of wild boar, four species of deer, beavers and goshawks. All while producing nearly 50,000 tonnes of timber a year.

"This is definitely a step in a much better direction than growing a stand of a single species like sitka spruce," Juniper said. "We need more wood for nature and we need more wood for timber. We can do both and achieve a whole range of other benefits at the same time: for biodiversity, for carbon, for flood-risk reduction, for a beautiful landscape — and for places for people to enjoy on their mountain bikes or with their dogs."