

Written evidence submitted by Dr Bruce MCleod, Chair, Friends of the Dales (TPW0008)

Stop Planting Trees!

I am of course trying to grab your attention. Tree planting is to be celebrated; it's an act of optimism and imagining a greener future. It is easy, relatively cheap, rewarding and enjoyable as a community activity. Planting trees is something concrete we can all do to combat the climate emergency.

More specifically, as Mark Corner, Chair of the Dales Woodland Forum, says: tree planting's needed "to increase carbon storage, enhance habitat connectivity, improve water quality, and help reduce flooding, in a way that enhances the landscape and is economic for land owners." More trees, which are undoubtedly positive for our well being, are welcome.

But, tree planting has become a bit of a fetish - an object and activity that hides a more complicated reality. For starters, we have to plant the right tree in the right place. Also, new trees are no substitute for established woodland. The mania for planting vast numbers of trees can cause serious damage to the environment.

There are two major downsides to the Great Tree Plant. First, other vital ecosystems can be destroyed. And secondly, we add to the millions upon millions of ugly plastic tree guards littering our countryside.

Trees vs other ecosystems

It sometimes seems like planting trees is the only answer to the question of how do we reduce and capture carbon emissions most efficiently while increasing biodiversity and wildlife.

Peatlands store immense quantities of carbon and any disturbance of this fragile environment, which inevitably leads to exposure and erosion, releases that carbon. Further, grasslands sequester just as much carbon as trees do. We need to protect what already very efficiently stores and sinks carbon. Trees have no business in these ecosystems.

The tragedy of Ash die-back is a warning against a quick, cheap and commercially-driven fix: throwing huge numbers of trees at the problem of carbon emissions. More time, effort and expense need to be put into natural regeneration: the better management of existing woodland and the protection of mature trees. No amount of saplings can "off set" the loss of mature woodland given the urgency of England's need to increase tree cover.

Plastic tree guards

It is absurd to pursue nature recovery while we take a product of the fossil fuel industry and inject it into the countryside, knowing full well that the vast

majority of plastic tree guards will never be collected and reused or recycled. They are left to litter and degenerate; to make their way into the soil and toward the sea.

But then again I have a thing about single-use plastic since I lead a campaign by Friends of the Dales to reduce it in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. However, Dr. Alan Simson, Emeritus Professor of Landscape Architecture and Urban Forestry at Leeds Beckett University and Chair of the White Rose Community Forest, had this to say when I asked him about planting with plastic:

I am not a great fan of putting small trees in Tulley Tubes. First, the visual impact of even small areas of new tubed planting in serried ranks usually some 2m apart is a serious visual imposition on the rural or peri-urban landscape. Secondly, I am not convinced that such plants are as strong as those not grown in tubes. A third reason has arisen more recently of course in that I'm not happy that the tubes are made out of plastic.

Dr Simson warns of ignoring the public who invariably want trees but object to massed tubes that resemble a world war cemetery. "People have declined to have such planting if it was intended to use tubes. I cannot accept that if we consult a community, and then ignore what they say, that we are being ethical or professional."

Alistair Nash of the Woodland Trust has in a similar vein warned of the "reputational risk" to groups that continue to use plastic. The public are certainly opposed to it. And now, in a major shift, even the Forestry Commission has recently advised: "Minimise or avoid the use of plastic." To date a lot of public money has been spent on something the public doesn't like or want.

Alternatives

Alternatives to this destructive practice abound, from natural regeneration, fencing, and over-stocking to compostable tree guards. Once we refuse plastic guards the industry will go into overdrive to provide eco-substitutes. No doubt about that. There are a lot of trees to plant. It's big business.

Progress is being made. Anthony Bradley, who farms near Long Preston, reports that he is "over half way through planting 1300 meters of hedges and have two out of three water courses fenced off with the last one to be completed this autumn. None of the trees has a tube." Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust is to trial alternatives. Chief Executive, David Sharrod, recently stated: "It's time for a change. We want to plant plastic free trees and return woodlands to their natural state. We will remove and recycle redundant plastic tubes and find a solution to plastic in our woodlands."

While pretty much everyone in the business of planting trees will decry how much plastic abounds in the countryside no major organisation is willing to step up and stop using it. As thousands continue to be pumped into the

landscape, when exactly do we say enough is enough? Our grandchildren will not be impressed if we don't take action.

There are those, like Skipton Town Council and Craven District Council, who have been reusing collected tubes and planting without plastic. I'm sure there are many other examples. However, take a walk in the Dales and you'll see these admirable efforts are a drop in an ocean of plastic waste.

It's high time we placed plastic guards in a larger context . Neil Heseltine, Chair of YDNPA, says: "We have a responsibility to tackle climate change in all we do. We have to be responsible about emissions, use of plastic, and planting the right tree in the right place for the right reasons."

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