

Transcript – Working in the forestry sector – National Tree Week 2020

Host: John McLuckie

Guest Speakers: Neil Cleland

John McLuckie: 0:16

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands Careers and Employability Centre. In this episode, to mark National Tree Week 2020, we'll be talking to Neil Cleland, Head of School at the Scottish School of Forestry at Inverness College UHI, about working in the forestry sector. I'm John McLuckie and I'm joined today by Neil Cleland. Neil, thanks for joining us in the podcast today.

Neil Cleland: 0:38

Hello John. Looking forward to it.

John McLuckie: 0:40

Can I start by asking you to say a bit about yourself and your journey to becoming Head of School at the Scottish School of Forestry?

Neil Cleland: 0:47

Yeah, well, my journey started back when I was 17. I started down at Hereford College of Agriculture, Holme Lacy, where I did my City and Guilds YTS training course. So I was down there as a student and then worked at a local estate at Hagley Hall, up near Kidderminster for the year while I was a YTS student and from there, I basically wanted to come to Scotland, so I think I sent 150 letters north of the border. I got two responses, Ben Reid in Aberdeen, the nursery and then Darnaway at Fassfern Estate. So I chose Darnaway, I was a chainsaw operator, estate worker, skyline winch operator on site, and was there for just under two years. And that was all part of my pre course experience that I was required to do before I came to the Scottish School of Forestry in 1986. So I started up at the forestry college as a student in September of 1986, on an OND course back then. And I studied there for three years, well two years at the college and we had a mid-year placement which has been an integral part of the OND and the HND Forestry course since its inception. And I was based down in Delamere, where I worked not only in the nurseries that they had down there but also working alongside the forest officers looking at plant control, import/export of plant materials, especially at the time, it was the height of the great spruce bark beetle infestation so we had a lot of inspections at the docks. So I worked there for a year as a mid-year student, came back north to finish off my OND, and then I went on to work for Tilhill down in Yorkshire, in Thirsk and there I was trainee forest manager or forest officer, primarily with the British Coal reclamation sites. So where the sites had been finished with the opencast mining, we were reinstating them. So we were looking at reinstating everything back to its original plan with a few exceptions, woodlands, hedgerows, etc, plus other estate work, monitoring and surveying and assessing and working alongside contractors. So I worked with them for just under two years again, and then I moved back up to Inverness and started up my own contracting company as it were, just myself employed.

Working all over the Highlands, so planting trees wherever I could alongside other organisations. Then I had a wee accident, put my back out and I ended up being a taxi driver for a couple of years. So that's where my people skills were nurtured and polished as it were. And then from there, Inverness College came back to me, the Scottish School of Forestry looking for bank lecturers, back in the early 90s. So I went on to their books as a bank lecturer, stepping in when staff were off or doing training courses. And from there, I was then put in touch with an organisation called Cantraybridge Rural Skills College, based out at Croy, and they were a college primarily set up for the teaching of special needs adults in rural skills. So me being in forestry, I did a lot of the forestry elements to it. But we also linked in with game keeping, farming, agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry, so I became head or senior lecturer at the college back in 1995 and I worked there until the early 2000s. While I was there, I came across some deaf people who we needed to communicate with so I learned British Sign Language and when my time came to an end at the college I trained as a BSL English interpreter. So I qualified as that back in the early 2000s and I took that on as a role but I was still doing bank staff with the forestry college so I was still dipping in when they required people to come and do teaching for the practical skills primarily. And then in the mid late 2000s, I then became a bit more involved with the forestry college, the interpreting work waned a little bit, so I got more work at the college. Became the full-time technician with a little bit of teaching and then over time eventually I became a full-time lecturer just over 11 years ago. The position became available the end of last academic year and I decided to go for it. And so that's my journey, so here I am now as the head of the school. So, looking forward to the challenge and just enjoying working there.

John McLuckie: 4:24

Fantastic. That's quite a journey, actually, from YTS placement through the different roles you've had within your career to get to where you are now, and I guess the experience of having spent time working in the private sector gives you a slightly different perspective. So we're recording this podcast to mark National Tree Week 2020. Why, in your opinion, are trees so important?

Neil Cleland: 4:44

I think historically, if you look at forestry in Britain, after World War One, we had less than 3% tree cover in our country. Hence the setting up of the Forestry Commission, the strategic reserve, trying to encourage landowners to plant more trees, just in case we went back to war, which we did back in the late 30s. But it's become more than that I think it has become more that we recognise trees as an industry, not just the tree growing industry, but the actual aftermath, the secondary and the tertiary industries. But also the importance of trees for holding the land together, keeping the landscape secure, I mean the amount of times you hear you see landslides, landslips. Generally, it's on denuded land, which has been denuded for centuries, not just recent. So the more trees you see covering the land, the more stable the land becomes, reduction in flooding further down, certainly with a lot of the housing developments going on just now where they have been clearing trees, there have been ongoing issues of flooding afterwards. But I think in general, for the general health and well-being the Scottish Government, as well as UK Government recognise the importance of a walk through the forest. I think it's one of the things that the NHS are looking at as being a convalescence requirement or recommendation, and certainly I think anyone who's walked through a forest, unless it's pitch black and they've been watching The Blair Witch Project, sort of makes you

feel much better at the end of it. I think in Japan they call it the forest shower and then I know there's organisations organising walks through the forest without mobile phones, there's so many different angles on it nowadays. Trees also help with the climate as well, they produce oxygen which is kind of important for life on the planet as well as the other gases there, but it cleans the air as well. It also reduces the temperature, so in your cities if you've got your urban forest, you've got your urban trees, they keep the temperature of the city down by about 5 to 10 degrees, depending on where they're kept and how many trees there are together. I think it's just the connection that we have culturally as well with trees, going back centuries, they would provide us with shelter, a provider of food for ourselves as well as our animals, buildings for our houses. There are very few people can look around the house they're in and not see something made of wood, the paper we use, it's not just the hard timber, it's the products from it, the pulp or the chip or whatever. In a lot of houses now it's a sustainable fuel, so if the forests are managed sustainably, you then have a constant supply of timber which can be used in so many different ways, and in Nordic countries certainly it's used for their houses. Timber, it's been with us for forever and I think as a country and the Scottish Government, we are looking to get, I think planting 15,000 hectares a year, new planting on top of our restocking program as well, so it's ever-increasing. Hopefully, we might get to 25% by 2050 or 2060, I don't know but we're certainly on the up and up, when you consider we started off at 3%. We're now sitting about 15, 16%, UK nationally, but we're going on the ascension and I think that's really important because industry-wise we cover everything from collecting the seed, to researching it, to the genetic side of it, to planting it, to growing it, to looking after it, right on to harvesting it and thereon it continues. And it's long term, it's not a short term project, it's a long term goal. We're caretakers, we're looking after what we've got, and we need to nurture it and ensure it's there for the future generations.

John McLuckie: 7:42

That's fascinating, thanks Neil. You've talked about some of the different roles that you've had within the forestry sector. Can you give an overview of the range of forestry careers that are available, perhaps touching on some of the areas that you develop at the Scottish School of Forestry?

Neil Cleland: 7:56

The Scottish School of Forestry started off as a forest training Centre back in 1974 and the courses evolved over that time. We started off primarily at the practical end of forestry, looking at making sure that we had practical foresters on the ground, crafts persons, people able to use utilise the machinery, tractor driving, chainsaws, tree planting, nursery work, ditching, brashing, maintenance of the forest, maintenance of the trees. So, we started off with that, and we still run courses very similar to that, you know, they may have improved with technology with the advancement of machinery, etc. So, we're no longer chopping things down with axes and bow saws, but certainly, we've got the point now where we are looking at training students up on harvester work and forwarder work as well as still doing chainsaws and the other practical side of things. We've really come on leaps and bounds in the HND, so the supervisory and the management field as well. The HND courses in forestry and arboriculture and urban forestry, we are training students to become managers, to become consultants, and with the BSc and the BSc Honours that we have, we are developing for people going into research, into upper management. One of the other programmes

we have running at the moment is the Modern Apprenticeship and we have a level 2 and a level 3 programme. Basically, we look at trees and timber for the level 2 and level 3 is a general woodland and forestry tree work. Now this is put out to forest industry, so we look for apprentices who are already in industry, working for organisations and they send their apprentices to us for a 6-week block or a 3-month block. Last year we had 10 apprentices coming through, 8 of which were with Forestry and Land Scotland from all over the Highland region, Lochaber through to Aberdeenshire. This year we're looking at 14 apprentices coming through this programme as of next January in the next semester. So it's a very, very good programme, it's not just for Forestry and Land Scotland, we've had a student from Glen Tanar, another student working out at Darnaway Estate, so it's open to anyone who's got estate workers wanting to get practical experience and then they use the estate work as consolidation, so back to the old apprenticeship style from a few years back. We're also working in partnership with Barony College and down there we are looking at getting a forestry machinery operators' certificate Modern Apprenticeship set up as well. They've had the pilot last year and that seems to have gone quite well, a few things they're ironing out, and hopefully we should be offering that in the next academic year. The apprenticeship programme is expanding and it seems quite popular from industry's perspective and also colleges in the way they teach and the partnerships which were are building up with them. We also have a rural land use management level 8 course and we're looking at using it as an aid in CPD sessions for people in the forestry industry, so they can dip in, pick out one or two units or three units and then sit those as a career enhancement programme. So we're giving people the skills from the very, very basics, as I say climbing trees, or picking a seed or learning how to plant a seed, right the way through to managing to planning, to be in consultations, to be involved in research. The research isn't just the forest itself, it's the use of timber, so where can we use timber? Where can we use the resources? How does it affect the climate, it's the environment, it's a huge area. The word forest isn't just about the trees, it's about everything within that environment, in the water, the land, the trees, the plants, the animals, whatever. So, we're trying to train students who are all well rounded, but there will be people who will specialise, but there are also people who will go in with a broader scope, and it's just nurturing and guiding them through that journey. So, we do have people coming to us with no knowledge whatsoever from school age, right the way up to students who are in the 40s coming to us who have been, either accountants or chefs or working in other fields, they've decided to try something different. So yeah, we provide a broad spectrum of education and experience in a practical manner as well.

John McLuckie: 11:33

That's an important point around the concept of lifelong learning from school leavers through to career changers as well as the CPD opportunities available for people in employment. You mentioned the government targets on increasing tree cover nationally. Do you think that will have an impact on the type of careers that people move into given not only the ongoing maintenance and replanting of existing forestry but also the ambitious targets for increasing coverage of trees?

Neil Cleland: 11:57

Well, I look at the numbers of students we have coming through. When I think back to when I was at college, basically there was two years, so you had 20 students in the first year, 20 students the second year, you had about 15 students out in industry, the mid-year placement. And then you have

the YTS, or the Op schemes or the Jet 2000s going and that was it. Now you look at the students we've got this year, from level four which is our entry in NC rural skills level, up to level six which is our advanced certificate level, plus two certificate courses in the middle for the level five, we've got nearly 60 students on that program alone. Then you've got the HNDs, I mean the first year HND, HNC Forestry, we're looking at nearly 40 students this year. Plus you've also got about 10 arborists this year as well, first years. Then 15 on the second year program this year, then you've got 22 students on mid-years and then you got your degree program, so the actual college dynamic has changed completely. We have grown exponentially and we are still growing and the industry is soaking them up. I mean we're looking I would say at an employment percentage of over 85% of students who come through us go into forestry or go into industry at some level, whether it be the practical, whether it be the managerial, whether it be digital or some research program. The other 15%, they've either realised it's not for them, or they may have gone into something related to timber, or conservation or another element to the environment. What we provide, as far as the job's concerned, as it expands which it will do, I wouldn't be surprised if we start seeing more people knocking on our door for more training, retraining. We've had folk come to us who have maybe inherited some money and have purchased a woodland or inherited a woodland, not knowing what to do with it. And so they've come to us to learn the skills to actually manage it, and in doing so, they then made what I call a network of friends and colleagues and workers because when we think about the Scottish School of Forestry family, I mean we are worldwide, we have people in China, people in Finland, Germany, Australia, America. We have affiliations with universities in Poland, in Canada, Czech Republic, so our feelers are out there and we've had plenty of students. I think certainly government targets in Scotland, but also in England, England has started to accelerate as well. So we will be influenced by what's on offer down there. I mean university, UHI, Inverness College, Scottish School of Forestry, we're the only academic establishment that offers the program that we offer, no one else in the UK offers what we offer from level four right up to 10/11. So really, we're in a good position and hopefully we remain in that position.

John McLuckie: 14:24

I think that really demonstrates the global reach and applicability of the programmes you offer at the Scottish School of Forestry and I was wondering if you would have any advice for people who might be looking at potential careers in forestry?

Neil Cleland: 14:36

Knock on the door and ask the question, because until you actually cross the threshold and show an interest, I mean, I would always say, if anyone's looking for a career change, do your homework, try and understand what it's all about. We've had quite a few chefs coming through the system in the last few years, they've been in a kitchen environment, hot, steamy, very, very noisy. And they choose forestry, because to them it's quiet. A lot of people used to come in to forestry because it's quiet, you don't see anybody. Unfortunately, that's not the case, you will be expected to communicate with the general public, with contractors, with foresters, with colleagues with whoever, and that's an important part of the job. One thing you'll learn when you come to forestry is you need to be a people person at every level, not just at managerial, but certainly at the practical side of things right the way through, because the whole point about it is, yes, you've got the trees, but you need to talk to the landowners, you need to talk to people unless you buy your own forest

and disappear and hermitise yourself in the middle of the forest, you're going to need people skills. So for me, anyone coming into it, think not just about the tree, it's everything else around about it, it's what's on the ground, it's the flora, it's the fauna, but also it's the human interaction as well as the natural interaction, because you are going to butt up against houses, farm land, water. There's always going to be something out there you're going to come up against and it's being prepared for that interaction.

John McLuckie: 15:50

That's great advice and I'm sure listeners considering a career in forestry will take that on board. With National Tree Week taking place, from November the 30th to December the 6th, does the Scottish School of Forestry have any special plans to mark the week?

Neil Cleland: 16:03

As far as National Tree Week is concerned, because of the situation we can't invite schools in which is what we would normally do, to get the school kids in to do tree planting, look at bugs and beasties and look at how the forest is developed, and get them to, I don't know, just enjoy themselves in a forest environment. So what we're doing as a college, I know we teach it but we're going to do tree planting, so we've got various tree planting exercises to do around our grounds. I know that Roddy Mackenzie, our arborist and urban forestry lecturer, he has received trees from Christies Elite, so he'll be using those trees with his arboricultural students to plant out as part of that National Tree Week. Most of the trees we're planting are native, there's Scots Pine, Rowans, Hazels, etc. So it's more going to be a tree planting week. As far as I'm concerned every week is National Tree Week, and I think it's nice to have a week dedicated so the nation understands it, but I think it's really useful to the nation to understand actually, every week is a tree week, every day is a tree day. They're so important to us in so many different ways, from the oxygen we breathe to the carbon it's capturing as well. The big climate factor at the moment is on everybody's minds, so I think it's understanding National Tree Week is great, to remind people it's out there, but just to tell people, guess what? It's every single day, certain people are working in the industry, from bringing on the seed right the way through to harvesting, or to nurturing continuous cover forestry, so it's something which I think is really, really important, so I look forward to it.

John McLuckie: 17:21

That's fantastic and just to say thanks very much for taking part in the podcast Neil, it's been really good to talk to you.

Neil Cleland: 17:27

No problem at all.

John McLuckie: 17:28

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