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# Back Where They Once Belonged? Local Response to Afforestation in County Kerry, Ireland

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## Abstract

Afforestation has many benefits at the local regional and global scale. The local social impacts of planting new forests, however, depend on a variety of contextual factors and other details including who is doing the planting, which species are being planted, the location of the planting and, perhaps most importantly, existing land uses and their linkage to social and economic circumstances. This article presents case study research into these issues in two places in County Kerry Ireland. Utilising the concept of the differentiated landscape, we examine the somewhat varying social responses to afforestation in the two study sites in light of the different environmental and social and economic circumstances in the two adjacent areas. We conclude that a more locally nuanced approach to forest planting than has been common in the past could well create greater social acceptance of future afforestation and benefits accruing from it.

## Introduction

It is hard to imagine landscape change more drastic than the planting of trees in areas where they have not recently been growing. Despite the dramatic change involved, the planting of new forests (afforestation) is generally looked upon (at least from a distance) as an almost unmitigated good. The benefits are myriad and include carbon sequestration, fibre production and the creation of habitat. One would imagine that these benefits would be viewed in an even more positive light in a place such as Ireland whose long and painful history of deforestation is quite well known in much of the western world (Neeson 1991). However, as Walter Firey (1999) wrote in the 1960s, for any natural resource management undertaking to be ultimately successful it must not only be biologically possible and economically feasible; it must also be culturally adoptable. The research reported here focuses on the latter dimension of Firey's trio in the context of afforestation efforts in the northern portion of County Kerry, Ireland.