

The Man Who Planted Trees – Sustainable Development?

A short-story by the French Author Giono, entitled *The Man who Planted Hope and Grew Happiness* originally appeared in *Vogue* in 1954 (Afterword 2004). The story was subsequently published in book form entitled *The Man Who Planted Trees*. The story concerns a shepherd called Elzéard Bouffier who plants trees in the alpine Provence region of France. The story spans from 1913 to 1947 when Elzéard died. The story is delivered by an unnamed young narrator. It is beyond the scope of this current paper to *describe* the story in detail, therefore in order to gain full appreciation of the investigation in this current text; the reader is referred to the book. *Typical forest economic* research, primarily studies forests in terms of the value of commercial wood production (Buttoud 2000:169). Indeed a forestry economic book dating from the period in which *The Man Who Planted Trees* was set, focuses on this topic. The economics book is predominantly devoted to the “discussion of timber resources and the economics of cultivation” (Hiley 1930:vi). Nevertheless Hiley does go on to write that “if men were actuated purely by a desire for financial gain, the forests of the world would gradually be cut down and very little effort would be made to replace them” (1930:1). But he qualifies this statement writing that “once it has been decided to make forests or to maintain forests in good bearing condition, very careful attention must be paid to financial considerations” (1930:3). However in the story *The Man Who Planted Trees*, perhaps financial incentives were not Elzéard’s primary motivation for plantation. Economic returns for timber are not the only reason for the establishment of forests. Nevertheless Hodge writes that “economics offers a framework within which to analyse the problems which we face in making choices about the environment in which we live” (1995:3). The purpose of this current paper is to provide the current author’s interpretations of *The Man Who Planted Trees* with specific reference to economics.

Environmental Benefits of Woodlands

During his initial hike through the Alps, the narrator informs the reader that “over this unsheltered land, high in the sky, the wind blew with unendurable ferocity” (p9). Indeed Elzéard believed that the land was “dying for want of trees” (p18) and undertook to rectify the situation. As a result of tree structures, deep root systems, understorey and organic soil layers; natural forests protect the soils reducing

susceptibility to erosion (Saéñz and Aus Der Beek 2000:22). Watersheds covered by forests are characterised by high-quality water production, due to the forest's great capacity for high filtration rates (Saéñz and Aus Der Beek 2000:24). Growing concentration of CO² in the atmosphere contributes to global warming. Trees and other plants capture CO² from the atmosphere through photosynthesis, fixing carbon in their biomass and releasing oxygen (Ramirez 2000:107). In the story, environmental improvements did occur as a result of forest growth. During his second visit to the Alps, the narrator tells that "as the water reappeared, so there reappeared willows, rushes, meadows, gardens, flowers" (p26). Therefore the tree plantation stimulated greater biodiversity in the area. Although the beneficial changes listed here are environmental, it is suggested that these benefits transpose into economic and social benefits.

Non-Market Values

Externalities are defined as "effects not normally accounted for in the cost-revenue analyses of producers" (Clark 1975:630). As a result of planting trees, Elzéard created benefits, some of which can be awarded no market value. Indeed the economic value of non-market goods is zero (Glück 2002:130). Also, the narrator describes the area where Elzéard plants trees as 'wilderness'; (p18) and (p26). Wilderness provides a "storehouse of biodiversity" which is of benefit to "even non-visiting members of the general public" (Loomis 1996:94).

Property Rights

There are four main types of resource regimes. Firstly, there is open-access. In this case no organised regulation of activities is imposed and there is no mechanism of allocating resources. The second regime is common-property where resources are restricted to defined groups. Private-property is the third resource regime. The fourth property regime is state ownership (Mather and Chapman 1998:38-40). The narrator asked Elzéard if the land, on which he was planting the trees, belonged to him and if not, did he know who it did belong to. Elzéard replied that he did not own the land and he "supposed it was community property, or perhaps belonged to people who cared nothing about it" (p18). Let us assume that the land *was* common property. The reader is unaware if Elzéard anticipated that the community would develop the forest. However, if the area were common property, villagers may decide to utilise

the forest for firewood or timber production. This could result in a situation, which Hardin describes as ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’. Hardin maintains that the tragedy of the commons can be averted by identifying land as private property ‘or something formal like it’ (1968:1245). However even if there were only one landowner they may also use the whole forest resource unsustainably and clear-fell the trees for economic gain. Therefore, the destruction of the resource may still not be avoided.

Economic Use of the Area

Although Elzéard, perhaps did not anticipate that the forest may be used for timber production in the future, it is important to acknowledge that this may be carried out, either by the villagers or a timber company. Indeed timber is one of the main sources of income for forest owners (Glück 2002:127). It is proposed that at some point in the future Elzéard’s forest *would* be utilised. If this were to be the case, it is suggested that multi-purpose use of the forest should occur. Indeed Gregory points out that “as an idea, multiple use has met with almost universal acceptance” (Gregory in Zhang 2005:143).

Sustainable Development

The narrator informs the reader that there were several villages “on these mountain slopes, among white oak thickets” (p12-3). The narrator goes on to tell that the inhabitants of the villages produced charcoal to sell for economic gain. These ‘charcoalburners’ “found no escape from the unceasing conflict of personalities”. The narrator informs the reader that “the men took their wagonloads of charcoal into the town, then returned”. There was “rivalry in everything, over the price of charcoal as over a pew in the church” (p13). Although it is not explicitly explained in the story, it is assumed that the charcoal burners create the charcoal from the ‘white oak thickets’. If this is the case, the author is possibly trying to convey the theme of *sustainable development* through the story. Possibly, if there is so much rivalry between the families, the forest’s resources may be exploited unsustainably. There was no social sustainability in the charcoal burning villages, the narrator informs the reader that there were “epidemics of suicide” (p14). The village where the narrator camped at the beginning of the book was derelict; maybe overuse of resources resulted in the

area becoming unviable for humans. As there was no water or trees, the area was environmentally unsustainable.

The 1987 report 'Our Common Future' by the World Commission on Environment and Development defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (1987:43). It is suggested that Elzéard was creating sustainable development. The narrator highlights that Elzéard was "obviously over fifty" (p18). Therefore Elzéard would not see the trees when they were fully grown, consequently some of the benefits were for future generations. When Elzéard fetched his sack of acorns (presumably originally collected from the white oak thickets near the villages), the young man offers to help him with his task, however Elzéard maintained that it was "his job" (p14). Perhaps the author is trying to put forward the idea that society as a whole should consider maintaining sustainability as a 'job' to fulfill and maintain. The narrator informs the reader that, on his second visit to the area (after the First World War), Elzéard had ceased to stock sheep, as they 'threatened' the young trees. Instead he kept one hundred beehives (p23). It is suggested that Elzéard regarded the environment as a more important aspect than economic gains from the sheep. Therefore Elzéard retains 'strong sustainability' values. Elzéard did not plant only one species of tree. He informed the narrator that he would also plant Beech and Birch trees in the appropriate ground for the species requirements (p20). So Elzéard created environmental sustainability. Social sustainability was also evident by the end of the story, as on his third visit to the area the narrator observed "neat farms, cleanly plastered, testifying to a happy and comfortable life" (p37). As a result of his actions Elzéard possibly created the option of economic sustainability by creating the forest initiative.

Economic Options for Residents

When the narrator crossed the mountain region for the first time, he camped near an abandoned village (p8). It is suggested that there must have been no means of economic stability as the village had become abandoned. At the beginning of the story, the Alps in Provence were "quite unknown to tourists" (p7). However, on his third journey in 1945 to the region, the narrator did not hike, as there was now a bus running between Durance Valley and the mountain (p33). This development may

have opened up the area for economic expansion therefore perhaps encouraging recreation in the forests. Indeed the narrator notes that “men and women, boys and girls...have recovered a taste for picnics” (p38). It is suggested that the forest would attract species of animal therefore people may come to utilise the forest. This would also contribute to the economic sustainability of the local rural areas. I think that Elzéard would have appreciated people participating in recreation and enjoyment of the forest. During his third journey to the area the young man found that in the village of Vergons there were “little fields of barley and rye; deep in the narrow valleys the meadows were turning green” (p37). This was as a result of the completion of social and environmental sustainability. Therefore Elzéard contributed to the economic viability of the area.

In conclusion, “economic theory presupposes profit-orientation, which favours the efficient production of marketable private goods” (Glück 2002:133). However, Elzéard did not strive for profit therefore, he was not economically rational. Nevertheless, in making rational choices Elzéard succeeded in conducting maximum product efficiency as he had no production costs apart from his time. Therefore his decisions were *not* economically *inefficient*. I believe that Elzéard’s actions were primarily concerned with improving the environment. As a result of Elzéard’s actions, he revitalised the environmental, social and economic sustainability of the area. It is suggested that Elzéard contributed to the regeneration of a rural mountain economy. Indeed without forests, many areas such as the Alps would not be habitable due to the ecological and socio-economic problems (Glück 2002:125). Although the production values for the forest were zero, Elzéard has created an economic value potential. Buttoud points out that, concerning forest economics, “the various social actors do not share the same vision of the world; they have different values” (2000:173). Therefore, the villagers may not hold the same views as Elzéard and may want an economic return from the forest. However, also, the villagers may appreciate the benefits, which have become apparent as a result of the tree plantations. It is suggested that the book is also intended as somewhat of a manual for the reader to grow trees. For instance throughout the story the reader learns that the largest and healthiest acorns must be selected (p14). Also that the acorns should be left in a bucket of water (p17). And the narrator informs the reader how Elzéard planted the

acorns. Therefore, as a result of the story, individuals may be influenced to plant trees or even a whole forest, which would create further sustainability in the world!

Word Count: 1986.

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Afterword

The Man Who Planted Trees

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