

Ian Standing, Secretary to the Hoof Campaign, reports on year one.

1. Before the U Turn

On October 29th last year Mrs Spelman confirmed a Government proposal to dispose of England's publicly owned forests and woods. At the same time a *Public Bodies Bill* was drafted, which if passed, would enable the Minister to destroy the 1981 Act that protects the Forest of Dean, to sell or dispose of all the public woodlands at will, and to abolish the Forestry Commission. Furthermore, the Forestry Commission's budget was being cut by around 25% and we wondered if it was being set up to fail. These proposals seemed unlikely to benefit the public or the forests.

In the Forest of Dean the reaction was immediate. By 7 November, representatives met at Speech House and the *Hands Off Our Forest Campaign* was born. The initial task was to circulate accurate information. The website was launched and the first batch of the red and white placards printed. In early December, Cinderford Town Council hosted a packed, public meeting. By Christmas, placards and yellow ribbons were everywhere and hundreds of letters were reaching MPs and the House of Lords.

As snow fell on January 3rd, over 3000 people rallied on Speech House Field. After speeches and music a replica of Big Ben was burnt. Pictures appeared in the national press next day and did much to spark the countrywide protest. The HOOF Website received 11,000 hits a day. Later that month the District Council sent a delegation to Westminster to express its concern. Mrs Spelman's much delayed consultation paper was published on January 27th. Comment from HOOF was sought by national TV teams from as far away as France and Spain. The Consultation proved to be a re-written scheme for privatising most of the English forest estate and scrapping much of the Forestry Commission. Some areas, including Dean Forest, were classed as Heritage Forests or Community Woods. These were offered to charities but with diminishing revenue support and no protection.

Nationally the public reaction was fury, but national conservation and wildlife bodies were silent. HOOF re-iterated its demand to keep the forests publicly owned and managed. We helped new groups to organise in other forests and we formed a National Forest Campaigns Network and hosted its first meeting at Speech House. Our MP organised a

meeting to explain the proposals. It was covered in the Telegraph next day. A film of this now famous event can be seen on the HOOF Website. Both here, and nationally, the protest grew. Thousands more letters were written. Questions in Parliament increased and the digital *38 degrees petition* attracted over half a million signatures. HOOF placards became standard pictures in the media at home and abroad. Singers and poets produced the HOOF CD to further the cause. A protest rally by cyclists at Cannop put the Forest on TV again. Even racing husky teams wore yellow ribbons

In February, Mrs Spelman ordered the Forestry Commission to remove all the HOOF placards from the Forest; “because” she said “they were contrary to government policy”. Just as we began to tell the media about this interference with free speech, the U Turn was announced and the Consultation abandoned. Instead, a new Panel would advise on future policy. Despite its very short life, the Defra Consultation attracted over 7000 responses and we now know that they were overwhelmingly negative. The pressure also led to the removal of the Forestry Clauses from the Public Bodies Bill. The public had won Round One.

2. After the U Turn

Update on the Independent Forestry Panel and HOOF.

Following the Government’s U Turn, Mrs Spelman announced the membership of the Independent Forestry Panel on 17th March. Chaired by Bishop James of Liverpool, five members were from conservation bodies and seven from forestry and other interests, but no one from the campaigns or the public. Nevertheless, HOOF members met some panel members at an early stage and we made contact with the Panel Secretariat at Defra. Perhaps on account of HOOF’s high profile, the Panel chose here for its first visit. A detailed case for Dean Forest was compiled and a finely printed copy reached each Panel member before they arrived. The visit was short; there were two workshops with 70 local people and regional interests. There was also a morning tour that included the Pludds. The Panel has since visited Keilder Forest and Kent. More visits are planned for next year. The Panel has held four meetings so far; mostly they have received research and briefing papers all of which are available on the Panel’s Website. Some are well worth reading.

At an early stage the Panel appealed to the public to send in their views. Replies have exceeded 34,000 of which around 8,000 came direct and the remainder via *38 degrees*.

The Panel's Interim Report, due later this month, may include a summary of them. Keeping a close eye on the Panel and asking pertinent questions is a small group of experts chaired by Jonathon Porritt. HOOF Chairman Rich Daniel sits on this group. In September, HOOF Secretary Ian Standing was invited as a speaker to a workshop organised by the Panel Secretariat to assist its understanding of cultural and social aspects of forests. The Panel's Final Report to Government is due in April 2012; we hope that it will reflect the public's wishes.

Meanwhile, the Government has published its draft National Planning Policy Framework which, by virtue of the proposed presumption in favour of "sustainable" development constitutes a further threat to our forests and woodlands. HOOF has persuaded the Forest of Dean District Council to press the Government to exempt "Heritage" Forests and Woodlands from the presumption and has made representations to Westminster such that our concern was noted in the House of Lords as recently as the 27th October.

After all the intense activity of the early months, we are now in a period of little news. The government may take time to digest the Panel's Report and announce its plans. In the meantime we should keep our placards safe in case they are needed. This first year cannot pass without paying tribute to, and thanking everyone, who made up the Campaign and promoted its cause. The support given to the Steering Group was huge. It came from all walks and ages and included months of voluntary work and effort. Donations amounted to £2,800 plus several hundred in gifts in kind. Costs to date are £2190; major items included rally insurance & equipment, printing placards, room hire, printing and some travel fares. Annual accounts will be available next month on request. Perhaps the most outstanding aspect of the Campaign was the way in which so many people worked together to achieve success. It is a privilege to have been part of it.