

Plastic tree tubes in the Lake District and the public water supply

Description



A field split down the middle with plastic, near Loweswater. Note the sheep behind.

I have been spending a few days in the Lake District National Park where the use of plastic tree tubes appears even more widespread than in Scotland's National Parks. A short walk up Raven Crag, above Thirlmere, provides a good illustration of the stupidity of what is going on.



(As an aside, everywhere you walk in the Lake District there are “no access” signs. I can see the Cairngorms National Park Authority, with its “Welcome to the Moor” signs ([see here](#)) which tell people to keep to the path, borrowing the message “keep to footpaths in the interest of public safety”).

The point of showing this photo, however, is that with deer controlled and the area fenced, there should be no need to protect trees from browsing deer.



But that has not prevented an area of predominantly broadleaved woodland being replanted with the use of plastic tree tubes. Some in the tree planting industry might defend this by arguing that the plastic tree shelters are required to prevent saplings being shaded out by bracken. If so, they need to explain the plastic tree tubes on the grassy area to the right of the photo.

It would have been far better for the environment to plant a few larger saplings which, as they grew, shaded out the bracken and allowed further trees to regenerate naturally, but that is not how the dominant forestry interests in the England or Scotland work.



The real shocker is that even conifers are now being planted inside plastic vole guards. The blanket afforestation of large areas of the uplands in the British Isles over the last 100 years took place without the use of a single plastic tree tube, so why now?



Naturally regenerating spruce below lines of plastic “protected” conifers

The evidence of natural regeneration on the ground suggests that hares and voles haven't suddenly adapted so they now browse less palatable conifers as well as broadleaved native trees.



Spruce regenerating in “clumps” just outwith fenced enclosure

Unlike foresters in the UK who space the trees they plant, nature and natural regeneration is far more higgledy piggledy. Elsewhere in Europe foresters use selective felling to thin trees that have seeded naturally to enable them to grow in ways that they can be used for commercial purposes.



In Britain, however, after the forestry industry clear fells an area it “re-stocks” it through planting, even where there is a plentiful seed source and evidence that a slope would regenerate naturally.

Now it seems the forestry industry has taken that process one step further, even “protecting” conifers with plastic tubes but in doing so they are doing anything but protecting the natural environment.



Within a year or two these tree tubes are breaking up, shedding plastic onto the ground and thence either into the soil or into the water catchment.



This is taking place on land managed by United Utilities to provide drinking water to the people of Manchester. Clean safe water? It seems that neither the Board of United Utilities nor the Environment Agency nor the Lake District National Park Authority is prepared to challenge the power of a forest industry wedded to plastic without any regard to the costs.

Scotland and its National Parks is sadly little different ([see here](#)).



For those who defend the use of such tubes as temporary, the evidence from the path suggests that the only way old tubes are ever likely to be removed is if the public starts to protest.

The needless use of fossil carbon to create plastic tree tubes that then pollutes the natural environment is something that affects all of us in the long-term. But yet Public Authorities across both England and Scotland seem incapable of acting and I have yet to hear our National Parks taking a lead and meantime the focus of groups like the Lakes Plastic Collective ([see here](#)) is on public littering rather the industrial pollution of the countryside. We need to tackle both.

Addendum

The day after writing this I spotted this tree tube left high and dry above the watercourse at Braithwaite:



Category

1. National Parks

Tags

1. conservation
2. natural environment
3. vision for National Parks

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