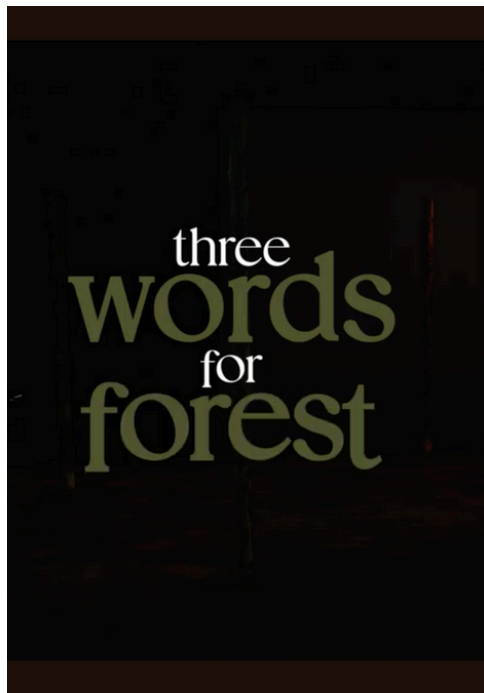




Three Words for Forest – exploring uncertainty and conflict in forestry adaptation through the arts

Authors/creators: Deirdre Heddon & Rachel Clive

How verbatim theatre can surface and explore multiple perspectives and help create an open and safe space to navigate conflicts and anxieties across different forestry practices and perspectives.



Headlines

Three Words for Forest is a play created from 30 interviews with the forestry sector. The play revealed a **shared, deep care for forests** across sectoral differences, and **multiple (sometimes conflicting) perspectives** about how to grapple with the uncertainties of climate change and adaptation.

Responses from forestry professionals revealed the need for **dialogue across different positions**. Responses from wider publics revealed widespread interest in forestry and decision making but also a lack of knowledge about the sector.

Arts-based approaches can play a **critical role in enquiries into forest adaptation**. They can foreground the emotional as well as practical factors that impact on decision-making, and offer opportunities for new kinds of informed dialogue, collaboration, problem-solving and knowledge sharing.

Background

Three Words for Forest is a play based on thirty interviews with forestry practitioners, researchers and policymakers from across sectors and geographies to explore the challenges, complexities, hopes and fears of working with trees and forests in a time of climate crisis.

The play explored how trees and forests are adapting to climate change and whether human actions and decisions impact on these processes. It addresses how we understand, live and work with these complexities and uncertainties. The research was interdisciplinary (arts-social science-scientific) and the play was developed with a creative team of arts professionals.

Findings

There are common risks, challenges and uncertainties across the sector, and different (sometimes opposing) practical and policy approaches for dealing with these.

Interviewees had deep knowledge about, care for and commitment to our current and future forests and complex understandings about time and adaptation.

They highlighted the difficulty of making forestry decisions or recommendations in a context of uncertainty and polarisation. But forestry specialists are open to listening to multiple perspectives and are interested in exploring ways of communicating across differences.

Scriptwriting and directing processes generated creative and innovative ways of giving equal weight/ space/ value to multiple different approaches and understandings. Combining and synthesising the evidence of people's words with the act of composition identified the need for spaces to pause, listen and reflect when navigating uncertainty.

Sharing the play with audiences revealed a widespread interest in trees, limited understandings about forestry, and a lack of knowledge about forestry as a career option.

Findings



Three Words for Forest film showing in Stroud

Arts-led interdisciplinary research can investigate complex environmental questions and open spaces for positive dialogue / new understandings in polarised contexts.

Arts research methods that explore and champion lived knowledge and experience can open up new ways of thinking about 'wicked problems' and reveal important understandings, insights and expertise about adaptation.

Foregrounding practitioners' expertise can disrupt sedimented, partial and/or received understandings (including policy understandings).

Theatre practice as research can explore practically and creatively the complexities of human/ non-human interaction and interconnection (including temporal and intergenerational complexity) that are necessary to understanding environmental adaptation more generally.

Arts practice as research can explore as well as represent uncertainty, failure, experimentation and collaboration as key adaptation strategies.

Implications & Recommendations

The arts can create **shared knowledge and opportunities for dialogue** and deeper understanding about adaptation across disciplines, sectors and publics. As such, it can create a space to **articulate a more meaningful policy story**, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives.

Our learnings identify the need to create **more opportunities for research that is practitioner and practice-led**, in forestry as well as arts research.

The arts can **create ways of surfacing different understandings / knowledge about trees and the land** (and how to work with it) in ways that do not prioritise any position or perspective. This means it offers ways for people to **listen, talk and be open to new ideas across differences**, something that is needed for effective practical action, not least in times of great uncertainty.

We revealed a shared and deep commitment towards treescapes and the natural world among interviewees that can **help people engage emotionally** with the challenges of climate adaptation. We argue that this approach could be the **starting point for cross-sectoral discussions** that are able to engage meaningfully and usefully with complexity, multiple perspectives and diverse sites of expertise.



Creators' contact details: [Prof Deirdre Heddon](#) & [Dr Rachel Clive](#).

This note is based on: [Three Words for Forest](#), [available to view on YouTube](#).

Future of UK Treescapes Programme Impact & Insights Note Series:

<https://www.uktreescapes.org/impact-and-insights/>

Editor: Deborah Talbot

