

Igniting the conversation

A catchy title, don't you think? It is also the mission of Tree Sparks, a social enterprise based in North Wales that aims to make forestry careers accessible to all. Tree Sparks wants to increase young people's awareness of forestry and environmental careers – and to ignite a conversation about trees so that everyone has a better understanding of what forestry is about. Here, Mima Letts, Founder of Tree Sparks, tells her story.

It all started with a seizure. One moment, you're fine; the next, you're waking up. On the ground. Covered in sweat. Confused and tired and agitated. That seizure changed my life, but for the better even though at the time it felt like the end of the world. Let me explain.

My name is Mima and I'm an undergraduate studying a BSc in Forestry at Bangor University. Having just completed my second year of study, I was going into my placement year, when I would take a year out from studying to get real-world experience in the forestry sector. I managed to land my dream placement securing a paid job as a ranger with Wyre Forest District Council. Although I'd been struggling with my health for a few months, everything was in place and I was ready to start. Then, four days before I was due to start, in September 2017, I had my first seizure and was admitted into hospital. I lost my job.

After various meetings with specialists and my university, it was decided that I would take time away from studying and that I should rest. I rested, but only managed two weeks. The boredom hit. I found myself missing the excitement, deadlines and stresses of university life. Instead, I was stranded 250 miles away in the sleepy Fens being cared for by my family. As a forester, I missed the field trips, walking in forests, getting soaking wet in the Welsh rain. Instead, I was stuck indoors wondering what on earth was wrong with me. Days passed, then months. In no time at all, it was February 2018 and it felt like I had achieved nothing.

Then, an email dropped into my inbox. It was nothing special. One of those mass emails sent to everyone with a university email address, but I actually read it instead of instantly discarding it... and I'm so glad that I did. It was advertising an upcoming business competition for young people in Wales called Big Ideas Wales Celebrated.

It was simple. All you had to do was come up with a business idea and you would be in with a chance of going to a national showcase event and winning some amazing prizes. I needed a



business idea, and quick, as the deadline for entries was the next day.

Most businesses exist because they provide a solution to a problem, so I started to think about a problem which I could solve, and this took me back to the beginning of my journey into forestry.

When I finished my GCSEs, I decided that a regular 9-to-5 office job was definitely out of the question and that I wanted to work in a job that would take me outdoors. I attended a very academically focused school which meant that while I was in sixth form, going on to study for a degree was expected. I stumbled across forestry by accident whilst searching for courses in outdoor education and countryside management, and began to look more into the subject. I managed to persuade my parents to take me up to Bangor to visit the university and I instantly fell in love with the idea of working with and learning all about trees (and in Wales too), and decided that forestry was what I wanted to do.

However, I came across a lot of barriers. My parents, teachers, friends and, to a certain extent, even I, did not really understand what forestry was. The lumberjack stereotype still existed, with my teachers just seeing it as a manual labour job; my parents fearing that, as a woman, I wouldn't be right for the subject; and my friends just thinking I had totally lost the plot! It is only now that I am in forestry that I look back and realise, firstly, how different the preconceptions are to the reality, and secondly, how lucky I am that I stuck with forestry and how fortunate I now am to be part of such a supportive, diverse and rewarding profession.

If only there was a way to show young people that a career in forestry is more than just checked shirts and axes. And that was it – my business idea started to come to life. There are already some amazing initiatives running in the UK including the Forest Schools concept and the RFS Teaching Trees project. But these are all very much aimed at a primary school audience, completely missing out those young people who are looking at taking their next steps into higher and further education, apprenticeships or even employment.



And so Tree Sparks was born – a social enterprise with the simple ambition: to ignite conversation about trees. I stayed up all night filling in the competition application and before I knew it, I was at the finals collecting my prizes. What started out as just a nice idea became an idea with potential, support and funding.

But what does Tree Sparks actually want to achieve? As my strapline suggests, I want to get people talking about trees and increase awareness about forestry as a profession, but there are a few areas that Tree Sparks plans to focus on.

First and foremost, Tree Sparks wants to run programmes aimed specifically at 15–19-year-olds, as these are the young people who are starting to look at life beyond school. I want to not only increase their environmental awareness but also demonstrate to them that careers in forestry and the environment are viable options, hugely rewarding and equivalent to better-known professions such as engineering, law and business.

Tree Sparks also wants to support young people who have already chosen forestry as a career path; mainly higher and further education students on related courses, and recent graduates. I want to give these young people a chance to develop some of the softer skills that can't be learnt in a classroom – like storytelling, social media management, public relations, entrepreneurship – and also provide an opportunity to see 'behind the scenes' of a new business and find out what it's like to actually run one. This is a virtuous circle: I also want to give students such as myself an opportunity to use what they are learning to help inspire the next generation, at the same time as making themselves more employable.

Lastly, Tree Sparks has a bigger, broader aim, which is to dispel the myths surrounding our profession. I want to break the stereotypes, get forestry noticed and make it accessible to all. I want to get the conversation started and ultimately make it so that Tree Sparks is a redundant concept as I want everyone, young, old, male or female to see forestry as a career path.

It is all very good talking the talk, but if I am going to achieve this then Tree Sparks needs to walk the walk. Tree Sparks wants to run a curriculum-based forestry careers programme in situ at schools in line with the academic year. The usual format would be to do a presentation in a school assembly to a whole year group, but this lacks the personal touch and only gives young people one short point of contact (and let's be honest, who actually listens in school assemblies?...). Tree Sparks wants to change the format and instead run short interactive workshops with small groups of up to 15 young people which can be run alongside lessons. These workshops will help to introduce a forest concept or problem; explore it in relation to other subjects such as biology, geography, economics and maths and then

Mima alongside some of her fellow coursemates and lecturer (photo: James Walmsley & Bangor University).

link it back to careers available in the sector. Tree Sparks will also have an online platform to enable it to engage with schools remotely after running workshops, full of resources for teachers and information in alternative formats such as 360-degree videos or quizzes for young people.

Finally, I also want to produce a resource pack aimed at teachers, careers advisors and parents, with targeted information about careers in forestry and the environment and the different routes into the profession, in the hope that this will help to legitimise forestry careers, remove misunderstanding and banish outdated preconceptions.

This all sounds great, but let's not forget who the audience is. I am lucky to have spent the past few summer seasons working as an outdoor activity instructor, primarily with groups of 15–17-year-olds, which has given me an insight into how difficult it can be to engage this age group. A key part of what Tree Sparks wants to do is to make forestry more accessible. Even though the CEO of a large forestry company knows their stuff, they tend to be suit-wearing and intimidating (and look no different from other professions), especially if you have never even heard of forestry before.

That's why Tree Sparks wants to run an ambassador scheme. I believe that the best people to inspire young people are other young people with credibility. Replace the 'suit-wearing executive with 30 years' experience' with a 'jeans- and hoodie-wearing' forestry undergraduate. Yes, we have only just started our journey, and life and career experience may be limited, but we are immediately more accessible – an aspiration to become a university student is a realistic ambition for many young people. Further, we are open-minded, yet to be weighed down with health and safety paperwork or worries about pension schemes. Students participating in the Tree Sparks ambassador scheme help to promote forestry whilst taking part in an integrated development programme to make them more attractive to future employers and more useful to the profession when they graduate!

In the short term, Tree Sparks is starting small. I hope to begin to run a pilot programme with students from Bangor University in 2019, in schools local to Bangor, North Wales. Tree Sparks is a sponsor of the West Cheshire and North Wales Chamber of Commerce Young Chamber programme, and in the future is planning to work closely with this programme to deliver forestry career sessions to schools across the region.

Thinking to the future, Tree Sparks aspires to run on a national scale. In order for this to become a reality, Tree Sparks aims to set up ambassador 'hubs' in higher and further education institutions offering forestry courses or closely related environmental subjects, where students who are Tree Sparks ambassadors are able to run programmes in schools in their local area. Not only will this allow us to cover other parts of the UK, but it will also allow Tree Sparks to help as many students as possible.

I don't want Tree Sparks to work in isolation and that is why I want to form partnerships. A key part of my work is focused on helping students gain key skills to make them more employable in the future, so Tree Sparks is hoping to partner with higher and further education institutions and societies. Not only will this allow us to easily recruit more ambassadors, but it will also help to keep our work relevant – I won't be young forever and in just a few

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months will become a graduate, but there will always be more students who want to help inspire their successors.

Tree Sparks has already formed partnerships with BFSA (Bangor Forestry Students' Association) and NSFS (National School of Forestry Society - University of Cumbria) and hopes to make more links with other organisations and societies. However, Tree Sparks will need to be selective when choosing and approaching potential partners - this is a new concept and it has the potential to be drawn in lots of different directions, so it will be important to remain focused on key priorities.

Tree Sparks has been lucky to receive business support from B-Enterprising (Bangor University), Big Ideas Wales and UnLtd, including financial support. All of the start-up costs for Tree Sparks have been covered by money won in business competitions (Big Ideas Wales Celebrated and Santander Universities Entrepreneurship Award) and through grants from Big Ideas Wales and UnLtd, but these funding streams are not sustainable, and I am very conscious that the money won't last forever!

As a social enterprise, Tree Sparks works like any other business - it has to cover its costs and also wants to make a profit. The big difference is that profits will be reinvested, to make programmes more accessible and help more students, rather than going towards dividends for shareholders. This obviously means that the programmes I want to run in schools will come with a charge attached, but I am very aware that while many schools have a willingness to pay, their ability to pay is limited. Tree Sparks wants to work in partnership with other organisations across the forestry profession to gain sponsorship for its programmes, whether this is a small, local firm partly subsidising the cost of one programme or a large, national firm sponsoring a whole cohort of programmes. Tree Sparks wants to work closely with employers in forestry to ensure that information is up to date and that programmes actually reflect the forestry profession, and also to help fund the work that Tree Sparks aspires to do. I am also exploring other revenue streams for Tree Sparks so that it will be a financially sustainable model, but I strongly feel that sponsorship is a viable option and one which will allow Tree Sparks to ignite conversation across the UK.

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Tree Sparks has been well received by funders as well as many in the forestry profession: it is a great idea (even if I do say so myself), but there is a lot of work to do to turn it into a reality. I hope that by December 2019, Tree Sparks will have successfully run its first pilot programme in Bangor, learnt what works and what needs changing and be ready to start running real programmes in both North Wales and in Cumbria with students from Bangor University and the National School of Forestry. I hope that Tree Sparks will be well on its way to developing its online resource platform, that it will have formed meaningful partnerships with the profession and, of course, that it has got more people talking about trees and forestry. I think of my vision and timescales in terms of how long it takes a tree to grow... planting some carefully sourced seedlings now and tending to them carefully is far more likely to yield high-quality results than simply broadcasting them everywhere and leaving their survival to chance!

Personally, in 12 months' time I want to have graduated, enjoyed a 'last summer of freedom' and I want to be healthy (I've found out the hard way that you don't recover overnight). The dream is to make Tree Sparks a full-time occupation, but this is something which will take time and effort to achieve. I hope that Tree Sparks will grow to become an enterprise which is able to make an impact on young people, help students and most importantly show the world how amazing the forestry profession is. Twelve months ago, I was just a nervous student wondering what had happened for things to go so wrong. Now, I am the founder of my own social enterprise, with the belief that I can make a difference. Who knows what could happen in the next 12 months...

For more information on Tree Sparks and the work it is doing, or to contact Mima regarding sponsorship, visit www.treesparks.co.uk.

Acknowledgements
Funders: B-Enterprising (Bangor University), Big Ideas Wales (Welsh Government), UnLtd
Supporters and Partners: Bangor University, BFSA, NSFS, Drivers for Change, North Wales Dragons
Others: My fellow students for support, idea sharing and creative input and James Walmsley for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this article.

Left: Mima being awarded the Social Impact Award at Big Ideas Wales Celebrated.

Right: Tree Sparks being presented with its sponsorship of the Young Chamber programme by Debbie Bryce (right), Deputy CEO of West Chester and North Wales Chamber of Commerce, and Lowri Owen (B-Enterprising/Bangor University).