The EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030:
Ecological change in the forest sector?

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In May 2020, the European Commission announced the new EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 which (among others) aims at strict protection of 10% of EU's ecosystems – including protection of all primary and old growth forests. The EU Commission clearly states that „nature is in a state of crisis" and declared that „at least one third of protected areas – representing 10% of EU land and 10% of EU sea – should be strictly protected." The EU Commission also emphasized, that "it will be crucial to define, map, monitor and strictly protect all the EU's remaining primary and old-growth forests".

Environmental and nature conservation associations welcomed this announcement. Ecological change in the forest sector is overdue. But the joy does not remain untroubled: As expected, the forest industry is running against the new ecological goals as set by Brussels and wants to remove the forest sector out of the sphere of influence of the biodiversity strategy. In addition to the Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the EU's "Green Deal" also strives for a new Forest Strategy. In addition, the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy is pending, where there is a lot of money to be distributed.

And this is where the wood industry hooks in: they insist on an intensified use of wood, because forestry is anyway "sustainable" and wood is a renewable resource, the burning of wood biomass is seen as "climate neutral" and it is also about jobs.

The ecologically oriented Forest Strategy should evidently become a "Forestry Strategy". The reporteur on the forest strategy in the EU Parliament's AGRI-committee, the Finnish MEP Petri Sarvamaa, even claimed that biodiversity would decline without forest management. This is of course in stark contrast to key findings in forest ecology.

A sober look at the big picture reveals unpleasant results: The non-natural, even aged and monotonous coniferous plantations that now dominate Central and Northern Europe are increasingly suffering from drought, bark beetle attacks and wild fires. Climate crisis meets failures of forest management.

The German biologist Pierre Ibisch from the University for Sustainable Development Eberswalde (HNEE) explains that the climate crisis is accompanied by an increase in extremes. They affect complex ecosystems made up of thousands upon thousands of interacting species. The forest not only suffers from heat and drought: it is also a cut patchwork quilt in contact with strongly warming and dry open land areas. Many forests lack diversity, intact soils, humus, dead wood and old trees. The canopy has been thinned out, and the forest itself is parceled out by countless forest paths and back alleys.

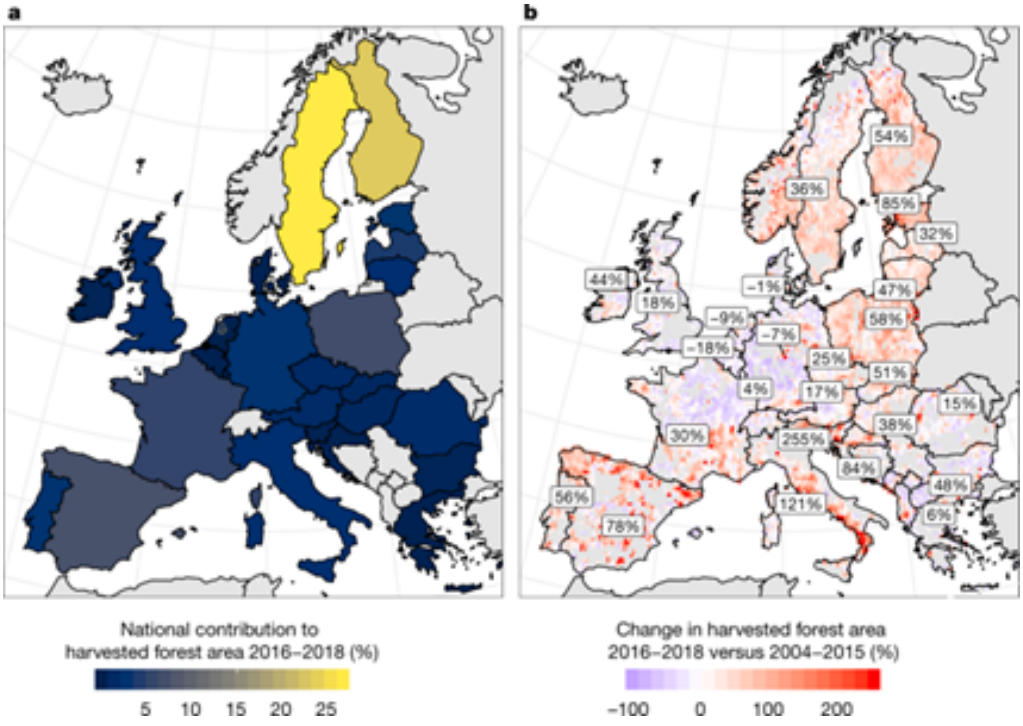
A study by the “Joint Research Center” of the EU Commission (published in Nature 2020) found, based on satellite data, that the loss of forest cover in the EU in 2016-2018 was 49% higher than in 2011- 2015. The harvested biomass even shows an abrupt increase of 69%. The presumed reasons: more forests are reaching harvest-ripe age, “salvation felling” due to insect calamities is increasing and the promotion of wood biomass leads to more cutting. The front runner is Sweden, which alone is responsible for 29% of the logging volume. The huge bare areas are replacing forests, which are exposed to heat and drought, which makes reforestation difficult. Many attempts of afforestation fail because the little trees wither.

The loss of forest cover and the increase in biomass combustion reduce the CO2 storage capacity of forests. The burning of wood is not climate-neutral in the short term, because the released amounts of CO2 are only absorbed again by the regrowing forest after several decades or even more than a century. From the point of view of the climate, wood CO2 is initially no better than coal CO2. The European Academies’ Science Advisory Council (EASAC) therefore advocates no longer promoting biomass burning as renewable energy.

The consequences of the climate crisis primarily affect unnatural, less resilient commercial forests such as biodiversity-poor coniferous wood plantations on clear-cut areas or heavily thinned deciduous forests with opened canopy. Storms, drought and insects have an easy play here. This in turn means that it is even more important to preserve all near-natural, species-rich, well-shaded and cooled - and therefore more resilient – forests of the EU.

The climate and biodiversity crises are closely related and mutually reinforcing. If forest losses continue to increase due to intensified felling and the climate crisis, many ecosystem services in forests, such as water storage, soil protection, local climate regulation and habitats for species, threaten to falter. And that means: Forests can no longer be seen only as suppliers of wood. They are important to everyone, not just the wood industry. Future generations will be grateful for every square meter of intact natural forest that we leave to them as a “base” for securing or restoring a stable forest cover with intact ecosystem functions.

Incidentally, the EU Council of Environment Ministers unanimously supported the Biodiversity Strategy. The European Parliament also approved the strategy, but at the same time voted with a majority for a resolution that had been pushed through by the AGRI committee and which largely supports the perspective of the forest and biomass industry.



Ceccherini, G., Duveiller, G., Grassi, G. et al. Abrupt increase in harvested forest area over Europe after 2015. Nature 583, 72–77 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2438-y

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