

Ecological forest change?

What should be done to preserve Europe's natural woodlands and heal our diseased commercial forests

Because Europe's forests are not doing so well ecologically, the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 wants to strictly protect all remaining primary and old growth forests and convert the commercial forest management into close to nature practices. Because: the climate crisis with drought, heat and bark beetles hits the many unstable wood plantations with full force.

The latest "State of Nature" report paints a bleak picture of our forests: less than a third of Europe's forests are of uneven aged and 30% are monocultures with only one tree species. Only 5% have 5 or more tree species. The intensification of exploitation, especially for energy production, leads to a further loss of threatened species (clear-cutting and removal of dead wood and old trees) and reduces the potential for carbon sequestration.

At the same time, the rather small remains of intact natural forests are shrinking (share of 4%), especially in the Carpathians and in Scandinavia. In countries like Romania or Slovakia, illegal practices and corruption are major drivers of destruction.

Across the whole of the EU, there are complaints about the inadequate implementation and lack of enforcement of Natura 2000 in the forest sector: natural forests are hardly mapped in detail, "appropriate assessments" rarely take place and, as a result, natural forests suffer from inappropriate protection from logging. Is the prohibition of deterioration of habitats and species (Article 6, Habitat Directive) really compatible with cutting down natural forests? In the Białowieża (Poland) case, the Court of Justice of the EU has stopped the logging campaign in the Natura 2000 site.

What needs to be done?

The demands of many environmental groups essentially relate to three areas:

- Comprehensive protection of primary and old growth forests: This is about mapping and comprehensive conservation of all forest treasures that still exist. As far as possible, contiguous forest landscapes should be preserved, including previously used connecting areas, in order to counteract the fragmentation of habitats.

For this it is urgently necessary to sharpen and enforce Natura 2000 as an instrument for natural forest protection. The fact that countries like Romania simply ignore Natura 2000 provisions in the forest sector must be stopped with legal action.

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- Measures against the drivers of the forest destruction. Predominantly, the heavily subsidized bioenergy sector is causing an increasing loss of valuable forest areas.

- Ecological turnaround in forest management: Away from ecologically impoverished even-aged forests, monocultures and clearcuts - and towards structurally rich, uneven-aged and mixed stands with tree species adapted to the location - ideally by allowing natural regeneration processes. A modernization of “good forest practice”, training / education and an adjustment of the subsidies landscape are necessary.

Forests will very likely be hit even harder by the climate crisis in the future. Therefore, the principle of precaution must rule. In addition to the commercial “use of wood”, the ecosystem services of the forests will gain massively in importance.

Ibisch / Blumröder (HNEE Eberswalde) underline that “regulating services of the forest ecosystems” are becoming more important.

The “cooling potential of forests” should be given greater consideration and an “ecosystem-based approach to the forest”, a “holistic climate change-forest-land strategy” is required.

Ibisch / Blumröder warn against overly “static and prescriptive objectives”, for example with regard to “climate change-adapted stock types”.

Furthermore, “the protection of the microclimate in forests and the maintenance and promotion of water-storing structures and soils” must have priority. For semi-natural deciduous and mixed deciduous forests, “in view of the current years of drought and heat, an immediate moratorium on felling is urgently recommended”.

And soil damaging practices and clearcutting must be prohibited on damaged forest areas.

Many experts also advise allowing natural regeneration on damaged areas. Above all, no new monocultures with other, supposedly climate-safe, new “bread trees” should be given space.

The fundamental change of our forest will happen. Either way. Its happening already. Either born by the climate crisis or through adjusted management and improved nature protection. Maybe we should put more trust in the wisdom of evolution.



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