

EDITORIAL

ARE FORESTERS THE BIGGEST PROBLEM OF OUR BEAUTIFUL HOMELAND?

The negative media campaign directed against foresters, and particularly against the representatives of the company Croatian Forests Ltd, has been going on for several years and has gained in intensity in the past two years. It all escalated recently with the scandal concerning the wind power plant Krš-Padene. The media rushed to smear individual and collective entities involved in the event. Based on impromptu analyses the company Croatian Forests was criticised for all kinds of things, including temporary non-payment of forest contributions to cities and municipalities (at the time when the state was at a complete standstill due to the coronavirus epidemics these earmarked funds could not be spent on the construction and maintenance of forest roads anyway), as well as raising a loan to boost the company's liquidity. Namely, the company agreed to extend the payment period of the wood industry for the delivered raw material from 60 to 100 days from the date of issuing the invoice for all deliveries from the beginning of the year 2020. Let us not even mention all those remarks on the use of probably the most well-known parafiscal levy in Croatia related to non-market forest functions. There is not one entrepreneur or politician who has not requested the reduction or abolition of this levy as a way of helping the economy. Lay people are not even aware of the fact that the crisis plan of Croatian Forests envisages complete elimination of this form of financing forest management for 2020. At the time of the coronavirus crisis these are probably the best business moves aimed at preserving employment in the company, employment of the customers and suppliers, as well as the company's liquidity. But who wants to read about this when negative news and scandals are much more interesting? Most people do not know either that at times of crises forestry has always taken care not only of itself but also of others dependent on it. In all crises forestry has helped the wood industry, written off debts of various states and political systems reigning in these areas, but also borne the consequences of objective and subjective business risks of those working in the wood sector.

The power of the texts published on websites and social networks is enormous. They reach large numbers of readers in a very short time. The majority of the published texts feature bombastic headlines and sub headlines. Only when the whole text is read does it transpire what is the truth and what is not. Usually the content of an article is softened towards the end, but the whole article is read only by the most persevering reader, while the majority retain only the negative information from the headlines and the beginning

of the text. Social networks are full of individuals and associations whose comments, often anonymous, create a negative image of the forestry profession. All these comments give an impression that foresters are one of the biggest problems of Our Beautiful Homeland.

Those better acquainted with the situation realize that forestry and agriculture are the pillars of survival in the remaining rural areas. Forestry, which is most represented in rural and less developed areas, provides a livelihood for employees of Croatian Forests, employees of numerous contractors in forestry and companies and crafts in the wood sector, and indirectly of all those who sell their products to wood companies. Forestry also guards and cares about the largest part of the ecological network in the Republic of Croatia. By protecting forests and forestland from fires in karst areas it forms an important link in the conservation of biodiversity in the state, but also creates a setting which helps the Croatian economic branch of particular interest - tourism. During the Homeland War it was forestry professionals who constructed roads needed to connect parts of the Republic of Croatia at the time when residents had to travel through neighbouring countries in order to reach their home country.

In our beloved homeland there are eight national parks and eleven nature parks in which forests constitute the basic phenomena. Basically, nature conservation has taken over the preserved areas for management from foresters. If these areas had not been managed according to forestry postulates and ecological considerations, we would not be able to boast of parks such as Plitvice Lakes, Risnjak, North Velebit and Mljet. In the karst part of Croatia, where the majority of protected parks are located, forests have never disappeared thanks to two and a half century long forest management. Present day generations do not know what forests looked like in earlier periods. The majority of the most valuable forests of pedunculate oak were completely cut down between the 1820s and 1920s. Today we witness the growth of new generations of managed forests, which are essentially the product of Croatian foresters. After World War Two the quantities of forests that were cut down almost equalled present day quantities because there were no other resources and the state needed the necessary financial means for rebuilding and renovation. Moreover, thanks to the wisdom and hard work of several generations of foresters, the present forest cover in Croatia amounts to 44 percent and forestland to 49 percent. Regrettably, most people do

not comprehend the concept of eternal forests, which are not always of the same age, because just like other beings they have their development stages. Their eternity extends through generations of forests. Cutting down old, mature forest stands opens the door to a new generation of a forest, and all foresters rejoice in it because it testifies to a successful change of generations and the survival of the forest in the same area. This transition is visible in lowland forests, but there are also mountain forests in which such an obvious transition is not striking, so it is less noticeable to observers.

Those less well informed or malicious do not know about or close their eyes to decades of pressures on the state forestry. These pressures are aimed at enabling individuals and companies to receive different benefits: in the past it was olive groves and vineyards, today it is the construction of wind power stations and grazing in vegetation-covered or bare forest areas. Croatian foresters staunchly adhere to the concept of sustainable management, under which they fight against reducing forested areas. Thus, if forests are sometimes cut down for conversion purposes as regulated by spatial plans, reduced forested areas are immediately replaced with new forests in another place. Although state forestry has often been thought as a hindrance to development, it has in fact defended lawful activities in circumstances in which some investors, as well as state institutions, have exerted pressure by speeding up the procedure in their favour without any legal basis. The company Croatian Forests Ltd, with all its strengths and weaknesses, is only a part of the overall picture in the Republic of Croatia. Personnel recruitment and management is the same as in other public companies and state-owned companies. Just like in any other profession, there are omissions and mistakes, but one thing is always the same: the postulates of Croatian forestry have been tested and verified for over 250 years. Present-day activities of lesser quality in some forests are the consequence of various factors and they do not differ from mistakes taking place in all other professional spheres (is not it true that sometimes a surgical operation may go wrong, or a building can be poorly constructed or a piece of machinery badly assembled?). Even in the most recent case of the Krš-Pađene wind power station, Croatian Forests Ltd have done their homework well by collecting the debt to the investor for easement in the amount according to the regulations valid at the time of starting the investment.

In most of its activities Croatian Forests Ltd are between the hammer and the anvil: on the one hand, there is constant pressure by users of wood resources for more felling and

more produced and sold quantities, and on the other, there is growing pressure to protect habitats and species, which all makes production more complex and more expensive.

The relevant ministry, in addition to dropping the word forestry from its name at the end of 2011 for the first time after 1919, has also become an evil stepmother to its own child, since the line minister, as a one-member assembly of the company Croatian Forests Ltd, by his/her orders to the Company management acts to benefit all aspirants to receive all kinds of products and services from forests and forestland. Thus, the most valuable logs are sold at negotiated prices which have for years been out of touch with market conditions, fuel wood and wood residues are sold under long-term contracts regardless of changed market conditions, and bare forest land, and even truffles, must be given over to anyone who wants them, even if legal regulations are not complied with.

The Croatian Forestry Association frequently points out that politicization of the entire system is one of the biggest problems of our society. Entire company managements are changed by politics every four or fewer years and nepotism is an inherent part of the system. Managements installed by politics in this way are forced to carry out the orders of the same policies, even if they are illegal. This is how companies, in our case Croatian Forests Ltd, are dragged through the media as criminal organisations; even public protests are organized against them. Can we even guess how the employees, our colleagues who do their jobs responsibly and lovingly, feel?

All these events raise fears of the terrain being prepared for giving state forests for concession after the company Croatian Forests is declared incapable of forest management. There are many examples of concessions generating exploitation of forests without any investments in them. The majority of European countries with abundant forest areas have strong state companies which manage and guard state forests, their areas and the life in them.

This text does not aim to defend anybody in advance: someone's innocence or guilt will be decided on by relevant institutions. In the state in which fruitless debates about the past are held, it is time to turn to the present in a more rational manner and not succumb to harangues and hysteria. Politics should loosen its grip and leave it to the profession to do what it knows best: in the case of forestry, it is the management of forests and forestland.

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