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FOREST RECREATION: NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR FOREST MANAGERS

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the main function of forests in Europe has been wood production. Over the last few decades, in many countries, management for nature and ecological functions of forests have become an important secondary objective, sometimes surpassing wood production as the primary function. As a direct spin-off from the focus on nature and ecological functions, social functions of forests, e.g health aspects and associated values now play an increasingly important role in modern forestry. These have started to move up the political agenda in many countries in recent years.

Social functions are not new. In some countries recreational activities such as seasonal collections of berries and mushrooms have always been an integral part of rural life. Visits by urban-based people to forests for walking and picknicking also have a long tradition. However, the demands for forest recreation have been increasing in volume and have become more diverse.

With the decline in the importance of wood production in some European regions, and major structural changes to the agricultural economy, nature tourism is often looked upon as a means for rural development. Due to its increased importance and complexity, as well as the potential conflicts with other functions, the social function of forests has to be dealt with much more explicitly than in the past. This increased attention and awareness is required at different levels: from policy-making, spatial planning, and designing to the management of a specific area.

In the most populous and urbanised countries of Europe, forests and urban green areas are often the main source of landscapes where public access to an area with natural qualities is available. It is important to understand the diverse values related to and benefits gained from forest recreation, or even from the mere presence of forests nearby. For example, recent research has pointed out positive psychological and physical health effects of having forests nearby. Experiencing nature itself is already known to have some positive mental effect. Moderately intensive physical activity, such as recreational walking and cycling, is also known to have substantial positive health effects. Forests nearby may help to promote

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such activities. Finally, although cities may not be healthy for forests, forests are likely to be healthy for cities, because of their positive effect on the air quality. Much research is needed to identify the different mechanisms and assess their relative contribution. The health effects of green space nearby may have important consequences for the layout of cities.

ISSUES FOR FOREST RECREATION

There are severe pressures on many forest areas and they are in danger of being degraded ecologically and physically due to high recreational use. This makes it important to develop good data on the intensity of the recreational use that is made of the forest, and the way people behave during their visit. New forests are also being established with public recreation very much in mind, often close to large centres of urban population. However, little is known about the differences in the demands within this urban population, especially those of ethnic minorities. Furthermore the demographic structure of the European population is changing. In particular the ageing population presents special demands: the žnew' elderly are likely to have more time and money, but to be less fit and to have special requirements. Also, the requirements of poorer people may be different from those of wealthier citizens. They are more likely to need facilities that are located in places they may travel to easily. Inclusive access is a part of the recent political trend to address social exlusion. There is also evidence suggesting that forests may help to promote social integration. It is not clear whether this is also true in the European context, and if so, what are the consequences for the planning, designing and management of forest areas.

Tourism within and between European countries is changing as new areas become popular and new types of tourism activity are developed. The natural character of forests means that they are seen as providing important benefits to operators of nature tourism, a growing market at the present time. Pressures on other landscapes, perhaps those of national parks or fragile ecosystems mean that planners often look to forest managers to provide recreational experiences in robust and natural landscapes that can better handle such pressures.

While holiday destinations further afield are becoming popular to those who can afford them, the forests of Europe continue to offer wonderful experiences, but only as long as their qualities are retained. Exploitation of forests for timber production, for example in countries where the previous Soviet system managed them in a low-key fashion, may have negative effects on the qualities of the landscapes in which recreation takes place. Poorly developed and maintained facilities may devalue the very qualities that people have come to see and over-use may result in environmental degradation. Thus, forest recreation and tourism have to be sustainable at both the site level and over the forest as a whole.

The countries of the former Soviet bloc and Soviet Union need to reconsider how recreation and tourism is developed and managed in the light of new land

owning structures and the changing market. Their traditional internal market for tourism has disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet system, so that new markets are sought. The relatively undeveloped rural and forest landscapes of many of these countries offer qualities unavailable in other countries, such as remoteness, quietness and the presence of large types of wildlife, including hunting prey. As a tool for rural development, forest recreation and nature tourism are likely to have an increasingly important role in these countries. It is therefore important to assess the economic and social impacts of recreation and tourism developments on rural communities. However, rural depopulation and land abandonment are becoming widespread throughout Central and Eastern Europe, so that many places lack facilities for people to stay and the rural infrastructure is decaying.

It is possible to identify several different "forest cultures" within Europe, where the relative amounts and types of forest, the traditional uses made of them and the place of forests in the culture of the countries differs. These can be broadly defined as Northern European, Central European, Southern European and North-west European. These regional, as well as national differences need to be celebrated and strengthened, because they allow visitors from other countries to experience something different.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FORESTRY

Recreation is important and forests are excellent places for it to take place. The landscape setting of forests is important – many tourists go to places because of the scenery – so that it is not enough merely to maintain access to forests if they are likely to be unattractive as a result of poor management, too much clear cutting and are too dark and dense. Having said that, with good planning, design and management it is possible to incorporate recreation in even highly productive forests. What kind of recreation do people want from forests?

- Experiencing peace and quiet is a basic desire when many people visit. In forests where the management is of low intensity this is easy to get and even in busy urban forests it is possible to get away fro other people, from city life and to de-stress.
- Walking (often with a dog) is a good form of exercise and can be important for health as well as enjoying the forest atmosphere. All that is needed is a set of routes of different length and to suit different abilities.
- Cycling and skiing are demanded by more active people and the forest road network is usually ideally suited for this together with other tracks.
- Horse riding does not mix with walking and cycling so separate routes are usually needed.
- People use picinicking as a means of social engagement with their family members, with friends and other people. A pleasant site with some basic facilities can provide a safe setting.

- Gathering mushrooms and fruit is a common traditional activity in some places but not in others. The forest needs to be of the right type to yield the produce.
- Hunting is another major form of recreation that has more traditional roots in forestry.
- Staying overnight in a camp or caravan site, a hut or in a local house or cottage enables people to spend more time in the forest and to absorb its atmosphere more deeply.
- Activities such as car rallies,husky dogs, motorcross and other sports can also take place.
- Bird watchingand nature education is appealing to many people, especially families.
- What about this list is new? Not very much. There are some new activities that have developed (mountain biking is a realtively new sport). So why are there new opportunities?

The opportunities are not so new as the circumstances under which they can be maximised – the changing nature of forest management has created opportunities where more recreation can take place while the changes in demographics and so on have increased the demand. The major opportunity for managers is to make the most of what they offer in meeting this demand.

For this the following are necessary:
- To have some data on supply (how much of what type of forest suitable exists in what locations) and on demand (who is wanting what recreation, when, where and how often).
- For foresters to have some education in recreation planning, design and management. Research has shown that knowledge of recreation by foresters is not at a very high level and is mostly acquired on the job.
- Resources are also needed – if timber receipts are reducing yet recreation management costs money then this has to come from somewhere. Valuation of recreation and the ability to charge people for it needs to be considered.
- There are also issues of equity – the people who bear the costs are not always those who gain the benefits,so transferring equity via government grants and subsidies can be an important mechanism.
- Infrastructure for recreation, ranging from access roads to picnic sites, toilets and overnight accommodation. Much of this may be old and out of date to meet current needs.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN FACTORS THAT WILLINFORM THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOREST RECREATION OVER THE NEXT S0 YEARS?

Everything in forest planning is long term and recreation is no exception. Although there are big variations across Europe, the main trends in society are the

same, except that what is already happening in Western Europe is psobably on its way to Eastern Europe. These are the main things that are predicted:

- Decreases in traditional households and a move away from traditional family patterns and outings.
- Changing work patterns leading to a desire for more leisure and a need for greater flexibility.
- The ageing population so catering for a changing demographic.
- Rise in public spirit and a desire for people to give back to the community via participating in and volunteering for outdoor recreation activities.
- An increasingly affluent society fuelling demand and broadening the array of choice available to people.
- The rise of the empowered consumer – people are harder to please.
- The convenience culture – wanting things tobe easy and convenient to use or get to.
- The networked society – technology has connected people and changed their habits, arranging things at the last minute.
- The experience economy –people increasingly seek experience over posses-sions.
- Increasing ethnic diversity – increasing migration around Europe.
- The rise of single issue politics – declining trust in organisations and concern for the environment as an issue.
- Greater awareness of environmental concerns and the environmental agenda.
- CAP reform and diversification changing the way the countryside works.
- The fragmentation of leisure – people demanding more variety of activity.
- Growing tensions inthe transport infrastructure – cars facilitate access but po-tentially reduce the quality of the experience.
- Road safety – growth in speed and volume of trafic leading to dangerous roads.
- Changing urban landscape – opportunities to shape development to increase green areas near cities.
- Changing percpetions of risk and increasing concerns around safety and sensi-tivity to risk,especially for children.
- Balance conservation and recreation – an increasing potential for ecological damage by too much recreation in some places.
- The future of planning structures and the way future decisions on land use and development are made.
- Sustainable communities – an increasing problem in rural areas.
- Social inclusion and ways to overcome the limited participation in recreation by some groups of society.
- The availability of information – more is needed to increase involvment.
- Retuned to nature people crave nature as a relief from the complexity and clam-our of life.
- Wellbeing – the increasing focus on the importance of well-being and quality of life.

- Declining mentalhealth – outdoor recreation as a possible means of reversing this trend.
- Drive to greater activity and health – more exercise being encouraged.
- Communal yearning – an increasing desire for community and the role of the outdoors in creating a sense of belonging.

CONCLUSIONS

Forest recreation islikely to gain in importance throughout Europe. The declining values of timber and the increasing focus on environmental quality and the pursuit of better health and well-being have transformed the agenda. Foresters have a huge opportunity to capitalise on these trends and to offer something that is highly effective yet relatively cheap in tems of improving the health and well-being of the population. It is time that foresters demonstrated this value for money and obtained even a fraction of the resources available to health services – this would make a huge difference.