

Hungary, 13/05/2019

There are articles in the press every day talking about biodiversity and the urgent need to conserve national environments, about excessive fossil-fuel consumption and the need for carbon sequestration, about global warming and the importance of forests in climate regulation, about population migration to cities and the need to revitalise poor rural areas, and about the protection of threatened forest areas.

And we, as foresters, are right at the centre of things. The idea of non-sustainable forest management is inconceivable, and has been for a long time. Throughout Europe, regardless of governments and politics, forests have always been subject to protection and conservation measures. We have been using wood to build houses and store carbon for centuries; foresters heat their homes with wood, and work in harmony with nature to preserve the flora and fauna that feed and protect them. They take account both of the diversity and of the multi-functionality of forest use as a basis for sustainable woodland management, and promote cascading use of wood, because that is their profession and the forest gives them their jobs and resources.

They should be benefiting from the positive, fashionable image of forests. They should be benefiting from strategies and measures that use forests to correct the excesses of our profit-based societies. But, in fact, the people of the forest look on with incomprehension – and perhaps even bitterness – at new constraints that politicians have come up with without their knowledge. Measures such as Natura 2000, the biomass and renewable energy directives, and complex regulations such as LULUCF, do nonetheless seem to be fair and well implemented, but what do people really think of them?

When our fellow citizens are asked what the forest should be, they prioritise the functions and challenges of the forest in the following order, with very clear differences in priority: first and foremost carbon absorption, then biodiversity, soil and water protection, renewable energy, leisure and hunting, and in last place rural employment.

We are well aware that the general public has little knowledge of forests, and there is often a temptation to fully set aside forest areas so as not to "kill" the trees. But can we say that a forest is alive if humans no longer have a place in it? Around twenty years ago – a blink of an eye in a tree's life – it was thought that good contracts would make it possible to reach a consensus between forest uses and would ensure that forests were managed sustainably. Contracts between sellers and purchasers of timber, between forest owners and hunters, between loggers and walkers, between customers and forest experts – each for the part relevant to them. But this type of contract is no longer sufficient. There are so many emotions and feelings of ownership tied up with forests, and so many interactions between the functions of the forest, that education, awareness-raising, communication and debate have become indispensable.

Can we harvest timber from forests near big cities without taking account of the residents of those cities who like to recharge their batteries among the trees? Can we kill wild animals at the pleasure of hunters without worrying about questions of health and the protection of the environment, flora, fauna or, quite simply, the sensibilities of walkers? Can we just go anywhere in the forest on foot or in snowshoes with no concern for the tranquillity of the area? Can we help forest users to understand by bringing in specialised police to penalise them for offences where necessary? And

who will pay for this forest management – can the ever shrinking revenue from wood products make up for ever growing management costs? And there are more questions I could ask.

In summary, there is certainly a need to educate people about forests, to organise respectful dialogue between forest users, and to learn to love forests so as to understand and protect them better. This will require well-organised technical support at local and regional level, in view of the diversity of forests, but this support cannot be funded solely from sales of wood.

We, in the European Federation of Forest-Ownning Communities, feel that it is mayors and their municipal councils that are best placed to take on this mediating role in sustainable forest management – not because mayors are smarter, more virtuous or more committed than foresters or activists from recognised associations in this sector, as mayors of forest municipalities might incorrectly think, but because they are democratically elected at the level closest to the public. They are by nature attentive to their constituents, and I don't know of a single mayor in the world – whether in a forest community or not – who would accept the forest in their municipality turning into a pile of rocks. And local authorities lead by example. I would reiterate the point that the people's elected representatives are appointed democratically and transparently, rather than being co-opted as may be practised elsewhere by pressure groups or lobbies, which are sometimes manipulated. But these ways of thinking also need to gain traction with people's elected representatives, with today's more direct and more unstable communication methods.

I think it is possible to evoke a sincere emotional response to forest-related matters, because people have a deep, unconscious, ancestral, primal attachment to the forest. We need to make the most of these emotions through joint actions that ensure sustainable forest management; and those actions can themselves feed into a reflection that can revive enthusiasm. Sustainable forest management invites us to take action in this virtuous circle that Europe so badly needs.

And that is what you have given me the opportunity to do today, by speaking humbly about the forest that I love.

Thank you very much.

Pierre Grandadam