

Protecting our Forests, Protecting our Future

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Forests are indispensable for human life and life on the planet. They provide environmental, economic and social benefits to the society and they address challenges, such as climate change and water scarcity. The importance of protecting our forests is recognized by the international community. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals urge states to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss. The same issues are addressed by the United Nations Global Forests Goals. Furthermore, in the new European Union Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change, issued last February, it is reiterated that protecting and restoring wetlands, peatlands, coastal and marine ecosystems, developing urban green spaces and installing green roofs and walls, promoting and sustainably managing forests and farmland will help adapt to climate change in a cost-effective way.

On the one hand, the relationship between people and forests is constantly evolving, societal demands on forests are rapidly growing and globalized markets are having negative impacts. Especially, the demands that society puts on forests are constantly increasing, including biodiversity protection, recreation, raw material production and carbon sequestration. Therefore, forests are under a bigger pressure than ever and the implementation of a sustainable tool for their management becomes a more and more challenging task. Taking the aforementioned conditions into account, how is it possible to enhance resilience and adaptive capacity of forest ecosystems?

Moreover, climate change constitutes a global threat, since it is responsible for extreme events, like floods and wild fires. During the last years, forests around the world have been suffering natural disasters of a catastrophic magnitude and in combination with expanding infestations, invasive species and phenomena as the unprecedented bark beetle outbreaks in Central and Eastern Europe, the *status quo* of our trees and thus, of our lives, is in jeopardy. The present situation is differentiated from the past given that the aforementioned events occur every year even in places that are not prone to such events. The number of human fatalities (for example, in 2018 during the Attica fires 100 lost their lives) evolve the ecological crisis into humanitarian with severe socio-economic impacts, compounded by the current COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, how can global, interstate and cross-sectoral **cooperation** will assist in coping with climate change impacts on forests?

In order to manage societal demands, mitigate the current extreme weather patterns and protect our forests, not only climate change adaptation scenarios should be put on the table but also policy measures and concrete actions to enhance their resilience. Healthy, strong and productive forests for the present and future generations can meet new demands, both societal and ecological. It is vital to better quantify their benefits and to better communicate them to decision-makers and practitioners at all levels. Effective adaptation policies include tackling forest disturbances and preserving their diversity, while boosting their resilience in order to address the new reality.

Sustainable forest management, as a holistic and dynamic tool, is intended to maintain and enhance the environmental, economic and social functions of forests for the benefits of present and future generations. It constitutes the principal vehicle for balancing the provision of multiple functions of forests. Raising awareness of and communication on the important role and multiple benefits of sustainably managed forests is a vital task. In this context, governments, local communities, science, stakeholders, including NGOs and the public must cooperate in order to comprehend the threats that forests face and determine the adaptation and mitigation actions to be taken in order to respond to a variety of environmental, social and developmental circumstances.

Following the aforementioned, the limits in the capacity of forests to respond to climate change and meet the various demands and requirements from society are evident. Balancing various objectives and interests, while considering possible trade-offs, will therefore remain one of the biggest challenges foresters in Europe and the

world face. In order to utilize forests as a contribution mechanism to solve the current planetary crisis, *the global community needs to adopt an integrated approach for forest preservation, which takes into account the cornerstone principle of sustainable development and humanity's needs.*