

Forests – an integrated part of Finnish life

J. Heino and J. Karvonen

In Finland, one of the world's most heavily forested countries, almost 60 percent of the forest is owned by private citizens and access to all forests is free – and almost everybody has an opinion about forests and forestry.

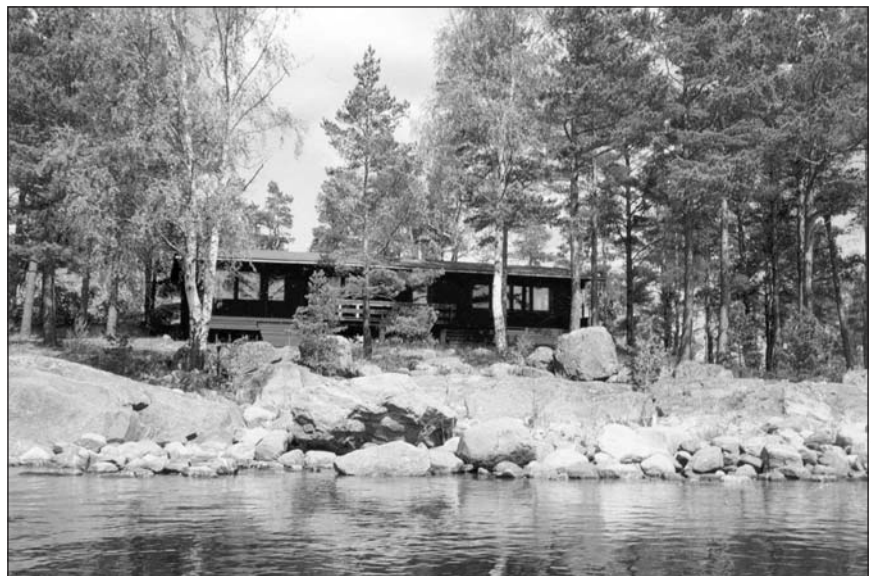
In most industrialized countries, the direct importance of forests for people's livelihoods has diminished radically over the past few decades. Today rural people constitute a minority and few of them are economically dependent on forestry. Nevertheless, the landscape effects of forestry are extremely visible to large numbers of people, because wood production is carried out on a large scale in these countries. Within the framework of environmentally, socially and economically sustainable forestry, it is possible to combine different forms of land use such as wood production, recreation and enhancement of biological diversity in a balanced manner. However, as people's lives become further removed from the forest few people are likely really to understand forestry issues; and without this understanding, forest-based industries will face an increased risk of land-use management conflicts (Hellström, 2001).

From the economic, environmental, social and cultural points of view, forests are Finland's most important natural feature. Finland is one of the

most heavily forested countries in the world, with more than 4 ha of forest per person (FAO, 2001) – ten times more forest per person than in Western Europe as a whole. Finns consider forestry and forest industries to be very important sectors for their economy and for the environment. The particularly close relationship between Finns and their forests is explained by widespread forest ownership (with almost one family in five owning a piece of the forest), free access for people to all forests and good cooperation between the forest sector and educational authorities.

The Finnish Forest Association (FFA) – the cooperative organization representing forest-related organizations in Finland such as private forest owners, forest industries, the Finnish State Forest Enterprise and research, recreation and education organizations – follows the development of public opinion through regular and rigorous studies. This article highlights some results of surveys concerning forest development, commissioned by FFA and carried out by the consultancy agency Taloustutkimus Oy (TOY Research) over the past decade.

Most Finns live among the forests, if not year-round then during holidays



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Taloustutkimus carried out face-to-face interviews with random samples of approximately 1 000 individuals from the whole Finnish population. Normal international standards were followed in the choice of the sample and formulation of the questions.

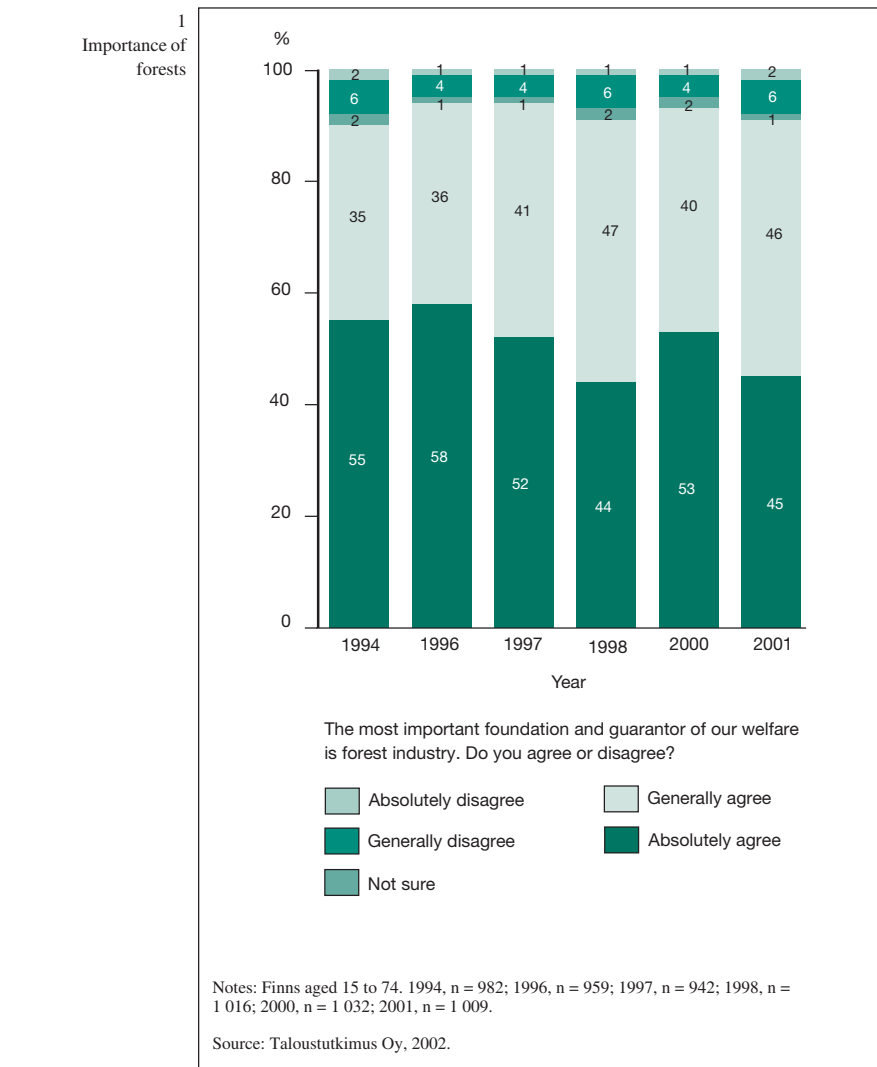
One of the most important observations arising from these studies is that most Finns today have a clear opinion concerning forest issues. In opinion polls the proportion of “don’t know” answers is negligible in comparison with equivalent surveys about forests conducted in other countries.

EVERY FINN HAS AN OPINION ABOUT FORESTS

With almost three-quarters of the land area in Finland covered by forests and a long history of forest industries, every Finn holds personal and specific views about forests.

According to an old Finnish saying, men fear the end of the forests and women the end of the world. The fear of the demise of the forests was once well founded; at the end of the nineteenth century shifting cultivation was still common and forestry organizations had very limited resources to promote rational silviculture. Today, however, the conversion of Finland’s boreal coniferous forests occurs only in exceptional circumstances, and Finns are less concerned about forest loss than about the forest’s recreational value and the conservation of biodiversity.

Finnish forest reserves have grown exceptionally in volume and increment during the past century, basically as a result of improved silviculture. For example, the total annual forest growth in the Finnish forests is today one-third greater than in the 1950s, and the forests hold 30 percent more timber (FFRI, 2002). And industrial use of forest resources is efficient in Finland. Of the



total annual increment for all forests (80 million cubic metres), around 60 million cubic metres are used as raw material by forest products industries (FFIF, 2003). Forestry activities are therefore a common sight all over the country and throughout the seasons.

Without broad social consensus concerning forest policy and a fundamental understanding of forest resources, such intensive forestry practices would not be possible. Admittedly, this consensus has not occurred entirely without conflict, especially over protection issues. At

times the discussions concerning forest management have been aggressive, especially over the issue of conservation. In most of the controversial protection cases, environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) – both national ENGOS and international ENGOS called upon by their domestic counterparts – have had a major role. Open debate and communication remain an essential part of contemporary forest policy and forestry practice. In addition to providing information, these practices allow citizens’ voices to be heard and encour-

age the participation of forest owners and other interest groups.

WHAT EXACTLY DO FINNS THINK ABOUT THEIR FORESTS?

The forest industry is highly important to the Finns. Until as recently as the 1990s, forestry was the dominant sector in the national economy. Today the metal and electronics industries enjoy enormous success and represent equally large sectors in terms of export income; nevertheless, 90 percent of all Finns continue to view the forest industry as the foundation and guarantor of their welfare, and this view is expected to continue well into the future (Figure 1). This is largely

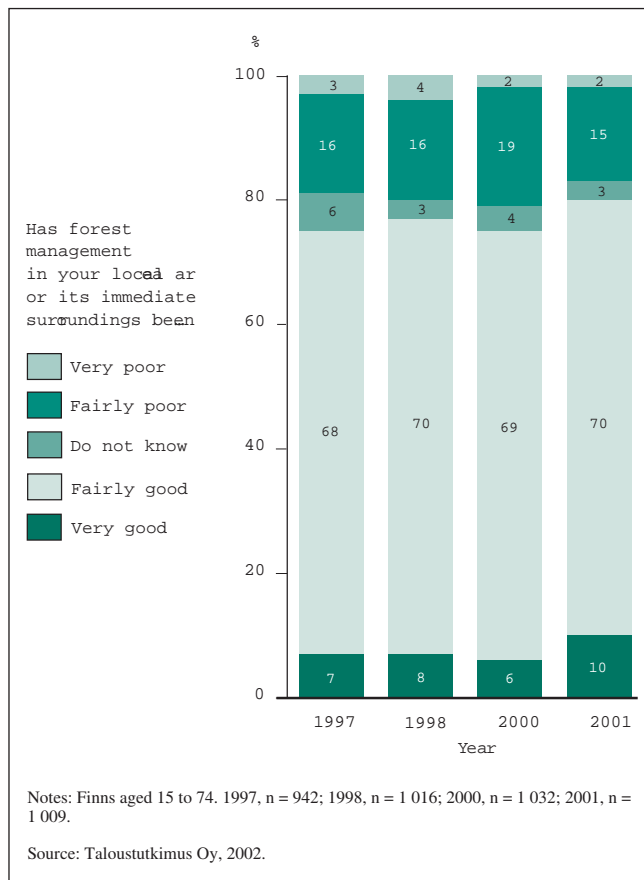
because the Finnish forest industry has successfully remained firmly aligned with international developments. The three largest Finnish forest companies rank among the ten largest forest companies in the world.

The Finns have adopted a very positive attitude towards the management and use of their forests. More than three of every four Finns consider the management of forests in their local area and immediate surroundings to be either very good or fairly good (Figure 2). One-fifth of Finns hold a more negative view. With regard to forest conservation, the situation is similar; one-quarter of all citizens hope for additional investment towards improving

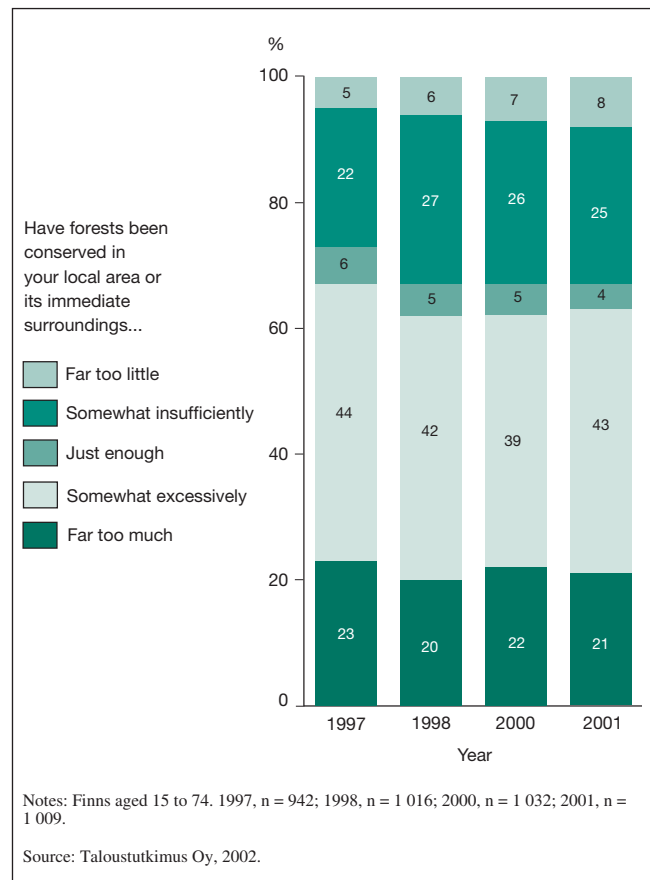
the degree of forest conservation, while others are satisfied with the current situation (Figure 3). The conservation of forest biodiversity features as a popular topic of discussion in public debates on an almost weekly basis. Approximately three of every four Finns feel that forest management has improved during the past ten years (Figure 4). This level of satisfaction indicates that government policies and the activities of forest owner groups to conserve and manage natural resources have been undertaken in the right direction.

Many Finnish forest professionals and researchers are among the leading authorities in their field, and in questions concerning

2
Quality of forest management



3
Forest conservation status

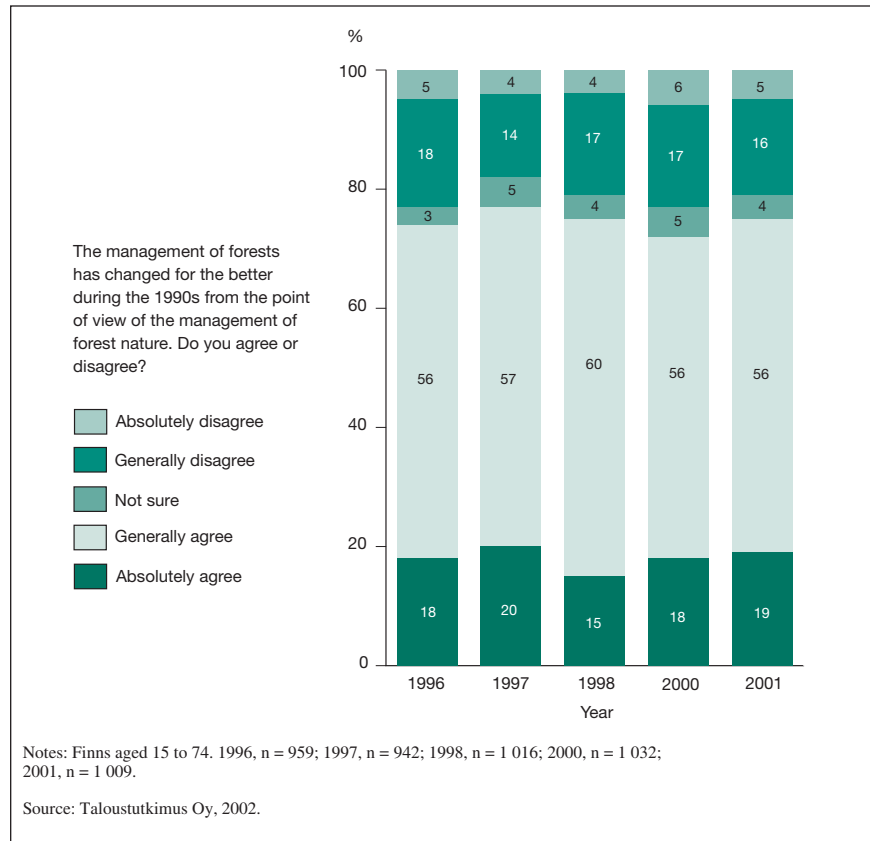


the management of forests Finns readily put their trust in the experts (Figure 5). In this respect, Finland appears to differ significantly from many other major forest countries (Demoskop Ab, 2000). Nature conservation organizations, which in many countries are seen as the most credible source of information, are felt to be on a par with the media and industry as a source of forest information in Finland. The only sources ranked lower are the politicians – in Finland just as elsewhere in the world!

WHY FINNS TRUST THEIR FORESTRY MANAGEMENT

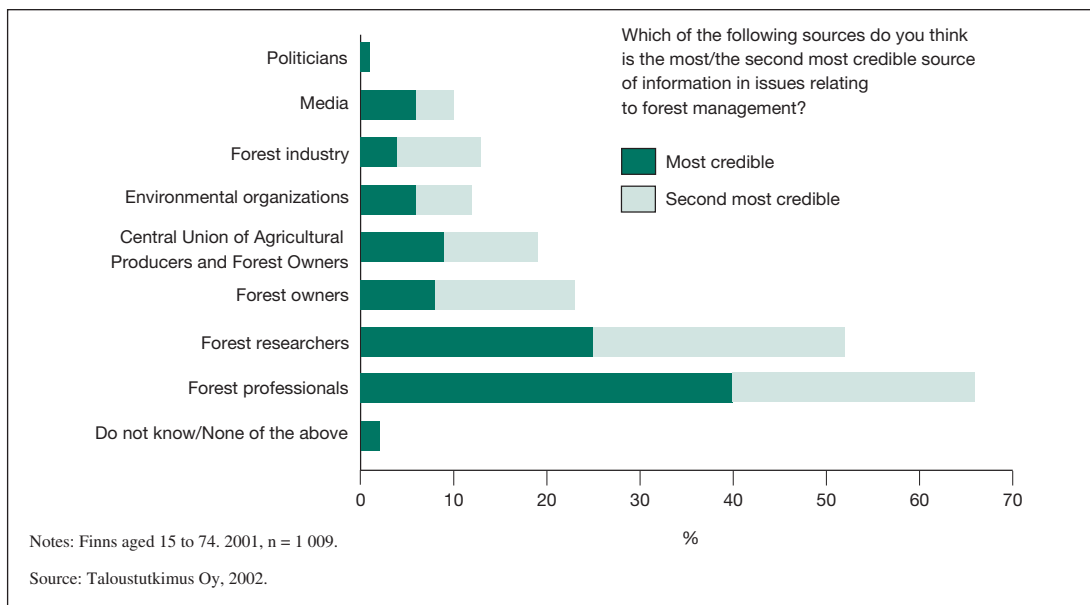
In order to understand why Finns are generally satisfied with domestic forestry, it is necessary to take a closer look at some basic circumstances such as the forest ownership structure, traditions, forest and protection policy and the cooperative activities between the forest and education sectors.

Finland is a relatively large country with a widely dispersed population of only 5 million. Finns literally live among their forests. Urban citizens remain in



4 Change in forest management

5 Most credible information sources



contact with the countryside, at least during the summer. One Finnish family in three owns a holiday cottage, typically situated on a lakeshore in the forest. Repeated studies have shown that outdoor recreation in the forest is considered one of the most important leisure activities in Finland. Finns live close to their forests and most of the population is used to rambling in nature from an early age, especially in the neighbourhood of their homes and holiday cottages.

Almost one Finnish family in five owns a piece of forest. Private individuals and families own almost 60 percent of the country's 22 million hectares of forest land. There are some 440 000 private holdings in Finland with an average size of 30 ha (FFRI, 2002). The fact that the forests have many owners, including ordinary citizens and consumers, men and women of different social and financial standing, has been an advantage mitigating conflicts among different land users.

Although forest ownership and timber marketing in most cases no longer constitute full-time occupations, they do provide important sources of supplementary income. Over three-quarters of the raw wood used by the industry is obtained from private forests.

Changes in society and migration into towns over the past few decades have deeply affected the fabric of family forestry. The increasing division of forest ownership as forest land is split among inheriting children has had repercussions on forest owners' aims and on forest use. Additionally, there are more urban and female forest owners than before, and the average forest owner is growing older. While most private forest owners indicate that financial profit is still important, they simultaneously classify the recreational use of their forests and the aesthetic experiences provided by them as almost equally important.

In today's more urbanized society, educational activities such as school forest visits, organized jointly by educational authorities and forest sector organizations, help strengthen the bond between young people and forests



FINNISH FOREST ASSOCIATION/ O. SAKARI

An important factor influencing the public perception of forests is the free access principle, which means that visitors are allowed to walk, ski or cycle on another person's land as long as landowners or domestic peace are not disturbed and fields or plantations are not damaged. Thus temporary visits to a location for leisure activities such as swimming or short-term camping are permitted. The traditional rights do not, however, permit people to use off-road motorbikes in the forests. Fishing and hunting are licensed activities, while picking berries, mushrooms and unprotected wildflowers is allowed free of charge, with some exceptions for com-

mercial use (see Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 1999).

As in many other countries, however, structural changes in society have tended to reduce the Finns' understanding of how forest resources may best be utilized. Urbanization has tended to weaken the bond between young people and the forest. In response, educational authorities and forest sector organizations intensified cooperation about two decades ago. Educational material, a network of forest professionals responsible for providing information and advice to schools and nationwide forest-oriented quiz competitions are among the achievements of this collaboration. FFA, as an

umbrella organization for the forest sector, coordinates these initiatives among a network consisting of forestry organizations such as regional forestry centres, forest schools, the State forest enterprise and forest industry companies. The collaboration provides, for example, practical assistance in advising where and how to organize educational forest visits. Even kindergartens are included, but emphasis lies on 12- to 13-year-old pupils (FFA, 2003).

FOREST AND FOREST-PROTECTION POLICY

The framework for Finland's forest policy for the beginning of the new millennium was laid down in the national forest programme 2010 (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 2001), approved in March 1999. The new government, appointed by election in March of the same year, included the national forest and protection policy platform for the next four years. A stable government forest policy contributes significantly to mitigating conflicts among land-use interest groups.

In general, the public is happy with the forest and protection policy as it is being carried out (Taloustutkimus Oy, 2002). Of course, if a poll includes the question, "Would you like to see more forest set aside as protected areas?" most people will answer "Yes", perhaps with the exception of those people in rural areas who might lose some of their wood production (WWF Finland, 2002). However, if you ask, "Are you ready to increase your personal tax burden in order to have more forest put aside as protected areas?" you will most probably get a different answer. This has been the outcome of some questionnaire studies in Finland, where environmental NGOs tend to ask their questions without putting a price tag on protection measures.

The missing price tag is typically connected to the discussion of protecting State forests, which amount to 9 million hectares or 30 percent of the country's land area. Of this area, only 3.4 million hectares are used for wood production. Environmentalists repeatedly call on the government and on Metsähallitus, the State-owned enterprise that oversees commercial forestry operations and

conservation activities on State-owned lands and waters, to conserve more of the State forests through strict protection; they claim that it will not cost anything or that the cost will be very low relative to the cost on privately owned land. From the point of view of forestry economics, forest protection on State-owned land is of course as expensive as on privately owned land. In the consideration of additional protection on State-owned land it would be more important to compare alternative measures aimed at enhancing values such as forest biodiversity. Indeed this has recently been done; the government has launched a programme, including several new innovative measures for State as well as privately owned forests, based on the report of a committee established to scrutinize the protection situation in southern Finland (MAF, 1999).

Metsähallitus is obliged to administer and use State forests and nature conservation areas in a manner consistent with environmental principles and must promote both nature conservation and recreational use. Following ecological inventories established after the Second



Interactive, long-term provision of basic information to decision-makers and the public – as shown in this discussion forum on forest issues – is needed to maintain the present positive attitudes towards forestry in Finland

World War, practically all areas considered worthy of protection have been put aside as national parks, strict nature reserves or other completely protected areas. In addition, significant areas in production forests are not being exploited because they have been preserved as key biotopes in landscape-level ecological planning (see www.metsa.fi).

Forestry planning is a widely used tool, not only for organizing forest management, but also for accommodating the mix of different land uses. On State-owned land, participatory planning has successfully been introduced. Today, landscape ecological plans cover all State forests and thus considerably contribute to mitigating possible friction between conflicting land uses and users.

CONCLUSIONS

To create efficient forest policies and to mobilize acceptance of them, it is crucial to possess knowledge about public attitudes towards forestry and nature protection. Since attitudes change over time, studies must be repeated at regular intervals. Today, foresters not only have to monitor the domestic arena, but also have to study trends in the countries representing the main markets for the forest end products. Significant amounts of incorrect information are disseminated. Hence, there is a need for constant professional communication concerning wood production and biodiversity enhancement.

Demographic and educational changes will probably make it more difficult in the future to maintain the present very positive Finnish attitudes towards forestry. Many countries in Europe seem to face the challenge of creating general acceptance for the forest sector. In most developed countries, "green" values are becoming more common among the general population as well

as among the increasingly large and diverse set of private forest owners. Thus established, efficient structures that facilitate interactive, long-term provision of basic information to decision-makers, key groups and the public in general will be needed in the future. Foresters should try to improve and even create new communication tools as societal changes take place, and should disseminate straightforward and simple messages. If foresters do not aim at staying one step ahead in creating common acceptance for the sector, there is an obvious risk of ending up in a reactive, defensive position.



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