

Perceptions of forests

“Trees outstrip most people in the extent and depth of their work for the public good”, wrote Sara Ebenreck (*American forests*). How much are people aware of the good that trees do? How do people today perceive the forests, and their relation to the forests? How have their perceptions changed over time?

This issue of *Unasylnva* looks at varying aspects of people’s perceptions of forests, and of forest management, forest industry, forest problems, forest cover and deforestation. It looks at the perceptions not only of adults, but also of children and adolescents. It looks at forests in myth and legend, in religion and spirituality. Underlying all is the fundamental question of how public perceptions have influenced and continue to influence how the world’s forests are conserved and managed.

The first four articles describe surveys of people’s perceptions of various kinds. J. Heino and J. Karvonen describe the results of surveys of public perception of forest management in Finland. In this very heavily forested country where private citizens own more than 60 percent of the forest and access to all forests is free, nearly everyone has an opinion about forests – and most seem to be satisfied with how the country’s forests are managed.

Young people’s attitudes are key to the environmental ethics of the future. L. Barraza and J. Pineda present the results of a study assessing how much secondary school students in two rural forested communities in Mexico know about the forest and its problems. Their study suggested that an educational system that integrates environmental issues in all areas of study can help shape young people’s awareness.

Ethiopia has suffered severe deforestation and forest degradation, with implications for household livelihoods, energy availability and land quality. In the survey described by K. Urgessa, a high proportion of Ethiopian farmers interviewed perceived forest cover as rapidly declining and would be interested in tree planting – especially if private ownership of trees and forests could be ensured.

The contributions (positive or negative) of forests and forestry activities to scenic beauty are often remarked but difficult to quantify. In a Canadian study, C. Young and M. Wesner tested a method for assessing the perceived impact of industrial forest operations on the aesthetic qualities of the landscape. They measured people’s

responses to variations in pattern and colour in a series of landscape images.

The next pages provide a look at how children see the forest – as shown through the drawings and creative writings of two groups of children from opposite sides of the world: some city children from Bangkok, Thailand, and some children living in a rural forested community in Argentina. Readers can draw their own comparisons about how the different experiences of these children have shaped their perceptions.

The next group of articles deals with cultural and spiritual perceptions of forests and trees. The article by J. Crews looks at the images and symbolic meanings of forests and trees in folklore and myth

and at how these meanings have filtered into language, thought and culture. L.J. Musselman examines the significance of trees in the Bible and the Koran. P.S. Swamy, M. Kumar and S.M. Sundarapandian

Trees are the earth’s endless effort to speak to the listening heaven.

Nobel laureate

Rabindranath Tagore

describe the history and ecology of sacred groves in Tamil Nadu, India, which still exist today, although their protection is becoming less certain with the erosion of old beliefs and taboos. These three articles are complemented by short pieces about the forest-influenced art of the Mbuti people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; trees, forests and beliefs in Sahelian West Africa; trees planted or preserved around holy sites in the Near East; the cultural significance of the cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) and its influence on the trees’ protection; and sacred groves in ancient Europe.

The last article looks at the role of people’s perceptions in influencing change. As described by M.K. Gachanja, Kenyan citizens, aware of the vital functions of forests, have helped to prevent the relinquishing of gazetted forest land to private land developers, through public protest, open debate and discussion, media and educational activities, and insistence on public participation in forest management decisions.

Since the beginning of human civilization, forests and trees have impressed themselves on the human imagination, and people continue to feel their power. We probably all have early memories of being in forests or sheltered by trees. Whether as children or adults, we have been awed by (and sometimes afraid of) forests and trees. We have been soothed by their shade and their silence. For our own well-being, we feel the need to ensure theirs.

The late eighteenth century French writer François-René de Chateaubriand wrote, “Forests precede civilizations and deserts follow them.” Forests are a vital part of civilizations – and civilizations need to care for them.