

Forests of Estonia

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With accession to the European Union on 1 May 2004, EU policies on forests and rural development are applicable to forest management in Estonia. This Briefing provides an outline of the nature of, and threats to, Estonia's forests, as well as a summary of the effects on forests of the EU accession.

1. Forest statistics

Just over half of Estonia is forested, comprising 2 284 600 hectares.¹ The mosaic of different forest types includes wet pine bogs and birch mires, spruce forests and arid pine moors. Most of the forests grows on poor sites that are either wet (36%) or arid (24%).² The forests are distinctively scattered throughout the country in small, well-connected patches. There are only two large forests: a strip of 10 to 20 km wide and 200 km long, stretching from the south-western coast to the north-eastern coast ('Intermediate Estonia'), and a 200 hectare forest north of Lake Peipus ('Alutaguse'). Most of the major towns have lost their surrounding forests.

The forest types found in Estonia include a remarkable variety of ecologically valuable habitats, including deciduous swamp forests (14%), herb-rich forests with *Picea abies* (20%), bog woodland (6%) and mineral-rich springfens, as well as coniferous forests on eskers and kames (4%). Alvar forest (4%) is a distinctive feature characteristic of Western Estonia.³ This rich variety of habitats is reflected in the range of rare and endangered species that find sanctuary in the forests. Flying squirrel, European mink, black stork, hermit beetle and vascular plants such as the yellow lady's slipper orchid, Eastern pasque flower and *Rhinanthus osil-*

ensis (a rare fen flower) are all present in Estonia's forests. It should be noted that Estonia is the only 'new' EU member state where, due to their abundance, the hunting of bear, wolf, lynx and beaver is permitted. There are 550 bears, 85 wolves, 700 lynxes and 17,500 beavers in Estonia.⁴

38% of the forests is privately owned, either by individuals or by small companies, whilst the state owns a further 38%.⁵ The remainder of the forested area is without ownership and its future is unclear. The average size of a forest estate is five hectares and there are no big estates or large holdings by a single company.

7.2% of the forest is strictly protected.⁶ This percentage is rapidly increasing as a result of the requirements of the Natura 2000 process and voluntary agreements between the Ministry of Environment and forest owners. Once the Natura 2000 network has been completed, strictly protected forests are expected to make up approximately 10% of Estonia's total forested area. All state forests are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), and there are also two FSC certified forests, which are privately owned. There are no forests certified by the PEFC (Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification Schemes) yet.



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There is, however, a national forest certification scheme: the Estonian Forest Certification scheme, which has submitted its scheme to the PEFC for endorsement.

The average annual harvest rate in the period 1999 – 2003 was 11.8m³ ⁷, with an estimated market value of 270 million Euros per year. 30% of it is used as fuel wood (including leftovers of the timber industry), 35% is used by the local timber industry and 35% is exported.⁸ The main target countries for Estonian timber are Finland (17

million Euros/year), Sweden (15 million Euros/year), United Kingdom (11 million Euros/year), Denmark (10 million Euros/year) and Germany (8 million Euros/year).

The commercial value of non-timber forest products such as mushrooms, berries, flowers etc. has never been calculated. It can only be said that berries and mushrooms are an important part of the income and cuisine of the poorest regions.

2. Current threats to Estonia's forests

The main current threats to the forests are over-harvesting, violation of harvesting rules, lack of restoration and reforestation, and drainage.

Increase of harvesting

The current volume of timber harvested (11,8 million m³/year) is at the limit of sustainability in that it just equals annual growth. The forestry industry is making the most of this opportunity to maximize its turnover and profits, but the current rate of extraction risks exhaustion of the timber resource. The most notable consequence is the over-harvesting of spruce, resulting in a loss of spruce forests at a rate of 15 000 ha/year, that is 4%/year⁹. The volume harvested is expected to increase in the next decade as land reform will bring another 770 000 hectares of forests into usage and a large number of coniferous stands will be ready to be logged.

Non enforceable forest management

Major changes are being made to the regulation of forest management. For example, the maximum size of a clear-cut plot has been reduced to five hectares and a specified minimum of dead trees must now be retained on the cutting plot. Despite these initiatives, there appears to be a reluctance to actually restrict annual harvest rates, perhaps because the associated loss of income to forest owners could exacerbate existing tensions in the rural regions. A key issue in addressing these problems is the role of regional and individual forest management plans.

Logging in violation of logging regulations

10% of all harvested timber (1,2 million m³/year)¹⁰ is felled in violation of existing forestry legislation. This results in direct damage to the forests, for example, by logging premature stands and excessive thinning. Estonian forests were privatised in the 1990s and there is a general lack of awareness of the need for and knowledge of sustainable forest management amongst (new) forest owners. For many, their main interest in the forests is short-term financial gain. The system of checks and controls needs to become more effective in order to ensure that harvesting regulations are adhered to. An increase in awareness of sustainable and responsible forest management needs to be promoted amongst the forestry industry and local people. Future subsidies from the EU under the Rural Development Fund could support this.

Insufficient reforestation

There is insufficient reforestation on an estimated 94 000 hectares of recently logged plots, 4% of the total forested area, and the number of plots which are not fully reforested is increasing. This is caused by a failure to seed, plant and provide after-care of young stands after a clear cut. For various reasons (including poverty) many of the forest owners do not reinvest the income generated from logging into reforestation. A legal requirement has been proposed that would require forest owners to deposit funds in a special government account before logging takes place, with the aim of funding subsequent

reforestation. Improved education of forest owners also has an important role to play here.

Drainage

550,000 hectares of wet forests have been drained and have lost most of their ecological values.¹¹ 44% of all swamp forests have permanently lost all of their natural features¹². Further drainage is expected to contribute to the loss of naturally wet forests. Tackling this issue will require dialogue with the Estonian State Forest Management Centre. Drainage has been supported with aid from the EU at the request of the Estonian government. It is hoped that future funding from the EU will exclude proposals for further drainage.

Natura 2000

The biggest positive change brought about by Estonia's accession to the EU has been as a result of Natura 2000. The list of official Sites of Community Interest has been adopted and implementation of Natura 2000 is now underway. New areas, where logging is now prohibited, are being created every day. Once finalized, the Natura

2000 network in Estonia will protect 10% of Estonia's old growth forests as an official target. However, the environmental NGOs in Estonia are still not completely satisfied with the official list and are currently compiling a 'shadow list', including all sites they feel need to be protected as well.

The greatest challenge to implementation of Natura 2000 is the attitudes of forest owners, who view the restrictions on forest management as both intrusive and lacking in compensation. The government is tackling these issues by offering to exchange Natura 2000 sites for similar pieces of un-owned land. Furthermore, EU community support for reforestation and other forest works will probably also help to motivate forest owners to manage their forest in a sustainable way.

The support offered by Natura 2000 for habitat management in protected areas is also worth mentioning, and may have positive effects. However, at the moment there is no compensation from the European Union to those who leave ecologically valuable forest unmanaged. It will be up to the Estonian government, supported by Estonian NGOs, to demand this from the EU under its new Rural Development Programme.

3. Conclusion

Estonian forestry is in a period of transition, which is likely to continue for some years. Accession to the EU has not yet had a major influence on Estonian forests. Change, when it comes, is most likely to be seen in an increase in strictly protected ecologically valuable forests.

EU legislation has little effect, however, on commercial forest. The problems associated with the degradation of commercial forest will still have to be solved by Estonian environmental and social NGOs, the timber industry and the government.

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This briefing is part of a series of briefings about
the forest situation in the new Member States