How community restoration and management of forests can help meet climate goals

EU Forests of Hope

March 2020
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Fern office UK, 1C Fosseway Business Centre, Stratford Road, Moreton in Marsh, GL56 9NQ, UK

Fern office Brussels, Rue d’Edimbourg, 26, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

www.fern.org

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Headlines like “UK and Ireland declare a Climate Emergency,” and “Spurred by youth protests, EU parties adopt climate change as rallying cry” make it clear – Europe is looking for ways to fundamentally rethink our over-polluting and over-consuming societies.

And forests are never far from the agenda.

Governments have crucial choices to make about forests’ role in tackling climate change whilst benefitting wildlife and European citizens.

Until now the EU has treated forests as feedstock for an intensive industry or as untouchable reserves. The recent European Commission communication “A Clean Planet for all” – also known at the EU Long-Term Climate Strategy – lays out several pathways to transform the economy and reduce emissions, but also emphasises increasing bioenergy production as forests’ central activity.

This is a worryingly incomplete picture as forests play a much wider role in society and in the climate. Better management of existing forests, enforcement of forest protection laws, restoration of resilient native species – all these activities would do more to help forests play their full role as a Natural Climate Solution (see box on page 4).

To decide what activities governments should prioritise to deal with climate change, economists and research institutes model different scenarios that would get carbon-dioxide in the atmosphere to a manageable level. Some of these scenarios reveal that it is possible to reach net-zero emissions without burning forests for power.
One such scenario\(^3\) shows that forests could remove 600 million tonnes of carbon dioxide per year by 2050. Instead of investing in dubious bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS) schemes, it foresees the EU legislating for and investing in energy efficiency measures in buildings, reducing materials used across industry by 2.5 - 5 per cent, increasing efforts to reduce emissions from shipping and aviation, and crucially, putting the health of forests first.

That is a totally different vision of EU forests than the one the EU is currently preparing for. This report shows that across Europe it can be achieved. There are communities in Estonia, Latvia, Spain and France who know that to deal with the climate crisis, we don’t need to intensify management so that more forests are in danger, we need to allow them to regenerate and use them in a way that strengthens local economies and helps us meet global biodiversity goals.

People have always lived within and beside forests and know how to use them sustainably. A recent Eurobarometer\(^4\) poll showed that two-thirds of Europeans “totally agree” that looking after nature is an essential part of tackling climate change and that “biodiversity is indispensable for the production of goods such as food, fuel and medicines”.

We hope you enjoy reading these case studies of communities showing how we can work for forests and how forests can work for us. They give a face to the actions that the EU needs to support if we are to deal with the dual climate and biodiversity crises, while managing forests in an economically and socially viable way.

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**Natural Climate Solutions: why ‘planting trees’ isn’t enough**

Europe’s total tree-cover has increased slightly over the past 15 years, largely due to afforestation (tree planting in areas without forest). Nevertheless, of the forest habitats that provide water and stabilise wildlife populations, 75 per cent are in a bad conservation state. The major trend, according to a United Nations report assessing the global state of biodiversity and ecosystem services is increasing intensity of conventional agriculture and forestry which reduces both biodiversity and forests’ ability to remove carbon.

Recent academic studies suggest that natural forests are better for both the climate and biodiversity. This means that afforestation offers significantly less benefit than leaving forests to naturally regenerate. According to Nature\(^*\), land put aside for natural forests to return can store 40 times more carbon than plantations and six times more than agroforestry. Applying this to Europe, where there is hardly a tree left untouched by man, initiatives to help restore and regenerate degraded areas can have enormous benefits and should be a cornerstone of climate action.

\(^*\) [https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01026-8](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01026-8)

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\(^3\) Scenario produced with modifications based off of the “demand-focus” scenario in the ECF/ClimAct net-zero model

Estonia

Vormsi church forest: a century ago and today

Algor Streng, forester on the Vormsi island

Vormsi church manor sits on an Island 140 kilometres from Estonia's capital, Tallinn. In 1901, it included 163 hectares of forest, mostly pine, with a small amount of spruce. At the time it was intensively managed. Clearcutting, selective cutting and windfalls made the forest thinner although some pine trees were allowed to grow 150–200 year old so they could be used for ship-building. In those days, people didn't know much about nature conservation: they impoverished the soil by clearing the forest floor of logging slashings and fallen trees, stopped reforestation by allowing cattle to graze, and land reforms reduced the forest area to 33 hectares.

The first time I went to church forest was over 10 years ago, and I still do some work there in winter. I mainly pick out old pines and spruces to provide the lower forest with adequate light and get better quality wood. The pine trees can be turned into logs suitable for boat building or building restoration. The remainder are used for beams and planks.

A healthy spruce makes good building material. It has more, but smaller, branches than pine, so it works well for the framework. It is also good to remove some spruce as an adult casts a shadow several times bigger than the pine, removing them assists the growth of the lower forest, normally filled with dry moss and bilberry plants.

Local forest owners ensure continuous-cover forestry in Vormsi, but companies now offer a competing model where they come and clear-cut the forest for you. For those owners who don’t live on the island or who don’t have any use for their timber, it may seem that the most convenient way to manage their forest is by ordering a timber company from the mainland.

Heartwood ordered by a restorer.
The effect on the island can be devastating.

It is now common that people buying land or settling on the island find that the forest surrounding their property is clear-cut. As a result, land prices are plummeting and tourism on the island has decreased.

Such forest management also decreases the value of the wood as trees planted in the open have more branches, wider growth rings and limited use. Such wood doesn’t last long, and boat-builders, restorers, window and door makers, and carpenters all want the best quality. Forest managers should think like the builder who is responsible for making good quality products that last a century or more.

It is best to cut wood in the winter. That way it lasts longer and has less soluble nutrients to offer to pests and fungi that would feed on the tree. It also means there is no need to soak wood with chemicals, which is problematic as when the wood rots the chemicals enter the groundwater.

In more demanding structures, such as village wells, stairs, boardwalks and bridges, it is important to use heartwood (the dense inner part of a tree trunk) which lasts longer.

Another reason for cutting the forest in the winter or cold weather is that soil and nature can be better preserved. Cutting forests in warmer months disturbs animals and birds, especially during the breeding season (see page 7 ‘Estonian spring and summer logging break respects life, law and tradition’).

Some suggest that the only way to preserve forest diversity is to conserve forests, but many endangered species are able to cope under continuous-cover forest management. Such management works if people only take what they need and leave waste from cutting (leaves, warts, hollow wood, etc.) as that is where wildlife thrives. If everyone follows these rules, such an approach is sustainable.

The southern and windy edges of church forest have a ‘protective forest’ that slows down the wind and quietens life in the deeper forest. The trees there are quite crippled, a lot of branches break, and a lot of trees fall. Growth rings are uneven meaning they are not good lumber, but it is exciting to go there, walking in the company of whispering giants.

If the forest is to survive and even improve for the next 100 years, cooperation with forest owners, timber exporters, harvesters and builders must continue to improve. Ensuring continuous cover management and an end to clear-cuts will make church forest better for the people, the climate, wildlife, and the carpenters and builders that use the wood. It’s time to harvest wood with the future and the lives of the islanders in mind.
Estonian spring and summer logging break respects life, law and tradition

Estonians have a close relationship with their forests going back many generations; many Estonian traditions encourage care for the forests and the wildlife that depends on them. So logging in spring and summer (when birds are nesting, hatching and fledging) is generally seen as taboo. Indeed, laws such as the Nature Conservation Act and the Animal Protection Act both prohibit the killing of wildlife and disturbing them during breeding time. There are exceptions, but “economic activity” is not one of them.

Although a wide array of factors influence the bird population, spring-summer logging has a particularly direct and negative effect. Avoiding it on the other hand would protect the lives of nesting birds and beasts, help stop the spread of root rot, improve wood quality and alleviate the risk of wildfires.

The seasonal logging ban was first proposed in 1999 by the Estonian Ornithological Society, supported by four other environmental and scientific organisations. In 2003, a two-month ban was introduced in Estonian state forests, which comprise 51 per cent of the total forest area. This is a positive step, even though the optimal duration would be from the start of April until the end of July. A four-month ban would increase the number of bird species that are protected from about 50 to 82. Some political parties are already saying they would introduce a three-month ban.

Since the ban’s introduction, the state forest company has suffered no major economic loss, and the Estonian forest sector, the Estonian job market and the economy are in a much better state than back in the early 2000s.

Estonian forests, on the other hand, are not. In April 2019 it was revealed that the country had logged more forest than ever before – reaching 12.5 million cubic meters, while the sustainable rate as calculated by the Estonian Environmental Agency would be a third less.

Martin Luiga, International communications coordinator, Estonian Forest Aid
In the South-East of France lies the region of South Ardèche, an area known for its forests and walking trails. It is there that groups have got together to form Wood Collective 7 (Collectif Bois 07) with the aim of creating a wood supply chain covering everything from logging and harvesting to sawing, planing and sales. It connects foresters, sawmillers and craftsmen – groups that sometimes struggle to find shared interests - and stands as a rare example of a system that combines fair remuneration to workers with respect for the forest ecosystem from tree to beam.

Environmentalists are happy because the Collective’s wood comes from selective logging – never from clear-cuts. Customers are happy because they only use skilled carpenters and sawmillers who can optimise how the wood is used. Wood Collective 7 is not seen as an intermediary, but as a guarantee of quality and respect for the forest, for raw materials and the people who work in the industry.

The process begins with the definition of the sensitive and ethical approach that will be taken in the forest. This approach is validated by a Pro Silva forest manager, and then a technical and economic discussion follows. The forest manager drafts the timber sales contracts for the Collective which then subcontracts the harvesting to loggers who are known for the attention they pay to trees.
trees. The Collective even organises site visits for its members and customers who want to see how the trees that will be used for the construction of their house are harvested.

Post-harvest, the Collective transports logs to one of the sawmills and then on to a storage area or even directly to the end customers such as carpenters and builders.

Throughout the supply chain, the Collective and its partners define fair remuneration and although there is no long-term contractual commitment, the process helps build lasting partnerships and trust. Having such a transparent pricing system means that customers are willing to pay higher prices as they understand the additional costs of delivering ethical products.

As the process is so local, customers also get to see what a difference ethical consumption can make. The forests they buy from often use continuous cover forestry (or close-to-nature forestry) principles in a region where clear-cuts are prevalent.

Sadly, it is not all good news. After having enjoyed a boom, the project ceased coordinating logging and timber sales in 2019 due to a lack of funding. A new project will soon emerge in the form of a log and firewood project in which customers pay in advance for their wood, meaning that loggers can invest and don’t need to rely on loans from banks.

To find out more, visit: http://alternativesforestieres.org/collectifbois07
Family run forestry shows a diverse range of benefits in Latvia

Jānis Rozītis, Pasaules Dabas Fonds

Working in forest management can be full of contradictory but related elements: knowledge and emotion; ecosystem support and commercial activity; material and non-material benefits to society.

Pasaules Dabas Fonds try to combine all of these elements in our work to establish forest management demonstration areas in Latvia. Each property and manager is different, but they all view forests as having a diverse range of benefits, which need to be preserved for the future.

In “Kalna Gavieši” in Skujene Parish (about 2 hours from Riga), the Vilciņš family manages approximately 1,000 hectares of forest, felling 4,000 – 5,000 cubic metres a year. They steer clear of clear-cutting, choosing instead to conduct selective felling operations. This type of continuous cover forestry leads to a landscape with sparser and denser groups of trees and trees of various ages and heights, but without the stark boundaries caused by clear-cuts. Such selective felling has a minimal impact on the forest, but also works from a commercial perspective as it provides optimal growth conditions for the trees of the future.
The Vilciņš family pays a lot of attention to preserving structures required for biological diversity, taking care of older trees, hollow trees, dead wood, leaving some scrub bushes and trees, demonstrating particular care in small wetland areas and at the edge of the forest. The owners also preserve high-value forest biotopes and micro-reserves for the black stork and the three-toed woodpecker.

When planning any felling, Vilciņš also tries to imagine what the forest will look like afterwards. The bigger the volume of felling, the more the forest environment will change, so it is important to consider the spatial positioning of trees, the mutual relationships between tree species and the need for trees of various thicknesses. There will also be changes to the ground vegetation – some areas can quickly become covered with grass, and the risks posed by wind will also increase.

Another consideration is when to cut. Vilciņš usually plans to fell in the driest part of the year, and if at all possible – in freezing conditions. This offers a higher likelihood of avoiding damage from diseases and pests, disruption to nesting birds, and makes it possible to reduce or prevent damage to undergrowth and roots when removing felled trees from the forest.

For 15 years, Pasaules Dabas Fonds and the Vilciņš family have also been organising seminars for forest owners, forestry workers, industry and governmental representatives and students to learn how to preserve biological diversity, how to move from clear-cutting, and other forest related issues. They have hosted thousands of people from Lithuania, Estonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Sweden, France, Finland, Denmark and beyond.

Ziedonis Vilciņš explains why he works this way: “Clear-cutting reduces the value of my property, but the methods we employ ensure a positive cash flow. It preserves the forest and all benefits we get from it.”

For more information visit the Demonstrējumu teritorijas page.
Portugal

From forest to desert and back again!

João Paulo Fidalgo Carvalho and Pedro Januário, Luzlinar’s Projecto Bosques

In Feital, Portugal near the Serra da Estrela Natural Park, trees are mainly appreciated for the fruit they provide.

But the reality is that they could change the very land people stand on.

Feital was once a forested area but it is increasingly becoming a desert. Because trees offer shade, however, planting them can turn a black and burned area into a green one. This is what the Feital community and Luzlinar Association’s Projecto Bosques is trying to do.

Project Bosques is working with local communities to promote and restore native forests and local biodiversity. In 2019 alone, 8,000 trees have been planted by local people who get together to climb the hill and plant trees. Sometimes it is just 30 people, but on planting days, more than 250 people can participate including children, students, artists, firemen, teachers and technicians. Participants range from four to eighty years old.

Luzlinar Association oversees 60 hectares of land, six hectares of which, ‘Jardim Das Pedras’, were given to them in exchange for a sculpture by Luzlinar’s founder and renowned artist, Maria Lino. For the past 25 years, Maria has been inviting artists to explore the surroundings and the restored areas, or simply to use her guest house as a gateway and source of inspiration. The house is presently occupied by an author writing a book about trees. Such work is a vital part of communicating the importance of nature conservation.

The Association’s other activities include the development of ecotourism through looking after 200 dry-stone shelters and the creation of hiking routes across the land. This has brought in new visitors to experience the link between art and conservation first-hand.

Projecto Bosques is a recent but promising addition which will hopefully lead to three new native wood shelters and a nursery offering native trees to residents.

University researcher and Pro Silva representative in Portugal, João Paulo Fidalgo Carvalho, is working with members of the Association to focus on high-quality oak timber at a time when cheap but lower quality timber from tree plantations is dominant. He has shown João measuring the soil moisture. In the degraded area, the volume of soil moisture was between two and three per cent while in the oak forest it is between 12 and 15 per cent.
that forests can be economically viable whilst still being sustainable and delivering ecological and social benefits.

Field trials were installed in different parts of the area which are now part of a research project called Scapefire which aims to value natural forest ecosystems and landscape planning according to their ability to prevent fire. Native oaks and broadleaves are promoted because of their resistance and resilience to forest fires.

If it wasn’t for the Association, this region could have become like many others in Portugal where the landscape has been turned into eucalyptus plantations that are responsible for substantial soil degradation and increasing forest fires. Project Bosques demonstrates an alternative way to manage a forest and Pedro Januário, member of the Association and an architect, believes that this kind of project can be expanded and spread to other regions, linking with other, similar projects.

There is hope in the air in Feital, but as long as big paper companies that exploit eucalyptus plantations continue to exert political pressure on municipalities and the government, it will be hard to expand close-to-nature forestry models to other Portuguese regions.
Galicia, Spain

Still working toward our Atlantic forest dream

Manuel López Rodríguez (Secretary of Comunidade de Montes de Teis)

In North-West Spain, near the border with Portugal lies Teis Communal Forest (Vigo, Galicia). This ancient type of communal property was established centuries ago with the arrival of Barbarian tribes to the Iberian Peninsula. Despite being banned during Franco’s dictatorship, they still exist in Galicia and North Portugal as little by little people are reclaiming their customary rights (about 22 per cent of Galicia is communally manged).

Teis Communal Forest was officially founded in 1998, at a time when a highway was being constructed straight through it, causing massive environmental damage. The forest was already suffering numerous problems, mainly caused by the government. These included high-voltage cables, garbage dumping and the introduction of exotic species. The community decided to respond by restoring the native forest, ridding the land of the geometric plantations of invasive species that were taking hold.

The biggest obstacle to this restorative dream, was the battle against Black Acacia (Acacia Melanoxyylon). Originally from south Australia, this species was introduced in the forties and fifties in the hope that it could be used as building material. This hope was dashed and the plantations were abandoned leading to fast-spreading forest fires which killed the last remaining pockets of native forest.

Twenty years later and story is quite different. Much of the Black Acacia has gone, replaced with a tremendous variety of native trees and plants, reproducing nature as far as possible. This process of profound healing has been amazing for the community to observe because native animals, plants and mushrooms are returning after more than seventy years, proving that with the right conditions you can have strong native forests near to a city.

The transformation process is still ongoing but locals are already benefiting from increased employment and the return of traditional forest uses. Local schools now undertake guided visits and volunteers of different ages and backgrounds get together to clean, control the bush, and continue the fight against Black Acacia.
It is not just the community that benefits, however, but also the wildlife that calls the forest its home. Teis Communal Forest believes that transforming degraded forests helps communities to conceive of a new ethic, based on respect for nature. One of the reasons why the forests became degraded in the first place was that those in power lacked an understanding of nature and thus explored planting the Eucalyptus and Pine plantations which have turned out to be such fire hazards. If those in government can walk in a real forest full of colour, smells, sounds and life, they will understand that nature must be respected not replaced.

But how can those in power go about helping such projects?

The first step would be to create a legal institution to promote native forests, with a real budget, a plan, and the tools to analyse problems and measure progress. The timber industry too must contribute to the preservation of native forest. Given the effects of intensive and extensive forestry, it is scandalous that it has not been regulated before now.

Finally, schools can play an important role in explaining that we are part of nature and that native forests are essential. The planet is heating up and the restoration of native forests is vital if we are to turn down the temperature.

For more information visit other communities that do similar work such as [here](#).
Magic mushrooms: how fungi help restore forests

Mediterranean forests are increasingly succumbing to the ravages of climate change, but an innovative project is finding ways to use mushrooms to combat it. Priya Devasirvatham and Sven Kallen, from an organisation called Volterra Ecosystems, explain.

Forests in the Mediterranean are facing an onslaught of adverse environmental conditions, particularly droughts, which climate experts say are likely to become more frequent and severe. This will exacerbate other stressors, including forest fires, pests and bacteria.

The trend of people migrating from rural to urban areas is decreasing traditional silviculture practices which have helped to mitigate the risk of uncontrolled fires. Controlled forest burning can reduce large wildfires, but the heating climate is increasing fires’ frequency and strength meaning they regularly threaten homes, lives and wildlife. Finding a way to reduce the intensity, spread and impact of fires would stop thousands of tons of carbon dioxide from being released into the atmosphere.

But even if we can control fires, we also need to find a way to control the pests and bacteria which are increasingly attacking our forests, thereby putting the health and existence of the whole forest ecosystem at risk. This is particularly worrying as Mediterranean forests are important biodiversity refuges.

But it is also biodiversity that could be the answer, particularly fungi, both below the ground (mycelia) and above the ground (mushrooms). They may be one of the most vital tools for helping forests adapt to climate change.

With this in mind, LIFE MycoRestore – a project co-funded by the LIFE Programme of the European Union (EU) – is looking at how fungi and forest management practices can make Mediterranean forests more drought-tolerant, resistant to pathogens, and resilient to climate change, in a socially and economically inclusive way.

As a species which has a disproportionately large effect on the natural environment, fungi – a fundamental biodiversity pillar – both below the ground (mycelia) and above the ground (mushrooms) support numerous ecosystem services and could be a defining tool for forests to adapt to climate change.

Numerous scientific papers point to the positive correlation between healthy forest fungi and forest ecosystem stability; biodiversity; pathogen/disease resistance; and drought tolerance.

In practical terms, the project uses two methods to introduce mushroom spores into the forest: Planting seedlings of bushes and trees which have been previously inoculated (or “mycorrhised”) in the greenhouse setting or inoculating adult trees in the field with mycorrhised fungi so as to produce edible fungi varieties, such as boletus edulis and truffles.
The project is being implemented in eight forests in Spain, Italy, and Portugal. Each forest varies in density (between 24 and 1250 trees per hectare) and species: from predominantly oak stands to beech, fir, chestnut, acacia and pine. The consortium of groups working on it involves four small and medium enterprises (Mycelio; Cerdeira Home for Creativity, IDForest; and Volterra Ecosystems), two research institutes (CSIC-IRNASA; IPSP-CNR), one social enterprise (SocialForest), one university (Universidad de Valladolid) and one foundation (Fundación General de la Universidad de Valladolid). It is led by CSIC-IRNASA (the Spanish National Research Council’s Institute of Natural Resources and Agrobiology of Salamanca).

Tomas Viguurs and Rodger Abey Parris founded Mycelio, an organic mushroom production company in Tavertet surrounded by forests. They are convinced that mushrooms can play a key role in protecting the planet: both as a meat substitute to help us move towards more sustainable diets, and for their ability to protect forests.

“There is so much that’s being discovered about mushrooms’ ecological role in the survival of this planet, and their ability to stimulate local communities” says Rodger.

As part of the MycoRestore project, SocialForest and Mycelio organise sustainable forest management training for young people at risk of social exclusion. This is a continuation of a scheme started by SocialForest, and means that marginalised youths can find purpose and learn skills by helping restore forests.

SocialForest helps train students and private company employees to be “Social Foresters” through educational or teambuilding workshops. “With these workshops, we reconnect people with forests and get private companies to invest in local sustainable forest management projects carried out by SocialForest and its trainees. This creates job opportunities for young people who need a second chance” says SocialForest’s founder and Chief Executive Officer Joachim Englert.

SocialForest’s staff are sustainable forest and green zone management experts. It was created five years ago to “raise society’s awareness about the important and multifunctional role of forests and, in particular, sustainably managed forests in mitigating the climate emergency.” Englert explains why mushrooms are an essential part of forest protection: “when it comes to forest protection and restoration, trees and mushrooms are team players. Mushrooms increase planted trees’ survival rate and support biodiversity. We can’t bet on one but not the other. That is why SocialForest joined the MycoRestore project”.

The MycoRestore project is expected to end in 2023, but MycoRestore plans to replicate itself in various areas of Spain, Portugal and Italy and to even scale up. Given the climate emergency and the increased global push for more sustainably managed forests, Englert is clear about what should happen next. He says that the EU and national governments should continue to fund projects like LIFE MycoRestore that reconnect local people with forests and place them at the centre of public debates rather than subsidising monoculture plantations or biomass for energy.

The project is still in its early days, so you can follow its progress and results on the website, (Facebook or Twitter).
Sweden

Taking forestry back to the future

Sweden’s old growth and natural forests have been decimated in favour of monoculture plantations. But a new project might be the catalyst for revitalising the country’s forests, says Eva-Lotta Hultén.

The popular image of Sweden as a forest-rich nation is no myth: 58 per cent of the land area is productive woodland. But beyond this statistic lies another, deeply disturbing one. Nearly three-quarters of Swedish forests are less than 60 years old, and most of our woodland comprises spruce and pine plantations.

According to the Swedish Species Information Centre (part of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) 1800 forest species are threatened, mostly because of Sweden’s dominant forestry model, which relies on clearcutting – and has led to monoculture plantations replacing vast swathes of the country’s boreal old growth and natural forest. Today, natural forests are so rare that many Swedes have never seen one in their own country.

At Plockhugget we’re trying to change this.

Plockhugget is a new Swedish company promoting close-to-nature forestry. In practical terms, this means producing quality commercial timber while retaining forest cover and ending clearcutting, through a system known as continuous cover forest management (CCF). This allows us to produce more timber of sufficient quality to build wooden products, such as furniture and houses, rather than focus on low quality wood for making pulp and paper products. Around 70 per cent of the Swedish wood harvested for material use ends up in pulp and paper products, whereas roughly 30 per cent is used as sawnwood or panels.

The company’s goals are to improve individual forest owners’ incomes, and for buyers to have access to varied, good quality timber, which they can trace to its source. We also want Sweden’s forests to be sustainable, beautiful and diverse once more.

Plockhugget helps bring together buyers and sellers of timber produced under the CCF system. We organise courses and provide services including support in the development of forest management plans and natural forestry management. All the wood we distribute is traceable to the stump, thanks to technology from the company Tracy of Sweden. With each plank we provide a story about the forest and its owners.

We also aim to reduce transport distances and help to revitalise the Swedish countryside. Therefore, we cooperate, above all, with small and medium-sized sawmills, as close to the harvesting site as possible.

Many of us own forests and manage them without clear-cutting. Some of us come from the industrial sector, others from an environmental background. We know that it’s possible to use the forest in a way which brings economic as well as ecological benefits.
We promote close-to-nature forestry as part of our advising and education programmes. However, we deal with timber harvested by other methods as well, as long as they meet our high CCF standards, including not using pesticides or fertiliser or planting exotic tree species. This also involves letting the forest develop, grow and age naturally.

In a natural habitat, trees both compete and collaborate with one another, and the most vital ones help each other use light and nutrition. This minimises nutrient leakage and carbon emissions, and environmental benefits are preserved and increased.

Variation and biodiversity are not only accommodated within the system, they are prerequisites. With more species in the forest, its ability to withstand fungi or insect attacks and repair itself after storms, fires and floods increases. Continuous cover forestry also reduces soil erosion.
As the forest grows, it sucks carbon dioxide and stores carbon in both trees and particularly in organic matter in the soil. Two thirds of the carbon stored in the Swedish forest is found underground. Since no large areas are clear-cut, almost all the carbon stays in the ground and the forest can act as an effective carbon sink.

Over time, close to nature forestry provides better quality timber, with dense annual rings and small twig marks. Although the trees grow more slowly, and therefore deliver smaller volumes of timber, the timber is worth more. Studies by the Finnish forestry professor Timo Pukkala and his team have shown that timber from continuous cover forestry gives lower costs and greater profitability for forest owners.

Those cultivating their forests according to our standard choose which trees to harvest and when, only cutting them when they are likely to receive a good price.

If, for example, interest in buying aspen timber is low, you simply wait for demand to rise and prices to improve. Each year you have more wood to supply compared to conventional use, and as a result, the value of woodland increases.

Over time, close to nature forestry provides better quality timber, with dense annual rings and small twig marks.

One of Plockhugget’s founders, Erik Kullgren, is also a forest owner. His desire to change Sweden’s destructive forest model is based on personal experience.

“In the early 2000s we allowed part of our forest to be clear-cut,” he explains. “We were shocked and ashamed of what we’d done to nature, and sought a different path. I started to learn about other ways to manage forests. In the beginning it was hard to stop interfering with the natural processes, because it goes against what you have been taught to do, but with a more natural forest comes resilience, beauty, less work and the good feeling of not wrecking the ecosystem we depend on.”

More natural, beautiful forests can also benefit Sweden in other ways. Eco-tourism is growing, and according to a survey by the organisation Visit Sweden, nature is the country’s second biggest attraction for foreign tourists. In a natural forest, forestry and tourism can be combined.

Sweden’s forest industry has a long way to go. We hope that Plockhugget will be part of a much bigger change than we can achieve on our own.

But for this change to happen at the necessary rate, more money needs to be invested in research and the government must offer incentives for encouraging owners to help create natural forests, rather than plantations. The EU also has a role to play: it could incentivise this through the Biodiversity Strategy, upcoming Climate Laws, funding under the Common Agricultural Policy or even the Green New Deal.

We’ve heard that Timmermans wants to work on reforesting Europe. We advise him to focus on restoring our existing forests: there is so much work to be done there.
Seán Ó Conláin is a woodland owner and a national committee member of ProSilva Ireland, an organisation which is dedicated to transforming the current approach to forestry in Ireland. He outlines how the vision for this is taking shape.

Forest cover in Ireland was a mere 1% in 1923, and the newly founded Irish State embarked on a policy of afforestation, which has brought major positive benefits including the development of a forestry sector and forestry products industry that currently employs 12,000 people. Today forestry cover has risen to 11% nationally, but it is still the second lowest in Europe. I live in Leitrim, a county with the lowest population density, and one of the highest amounts of tree coverage (18%).

These statistics might sound like good news.

However, our national policy encouraged the planting of short rotation conifers (typically Sitka spruce), which grow remarkably well in Ireland’s temperate climate. Initially, due to lack of resources, the State bought poorer land on which to grow these and today commercial forestry is often associated with poor land on which only trees will grow.

What’s more, even-aged monoculture conifer woodlands frequently suffer from very poor biodiversity, and are dark, and even inhospitable to humans. More recently, it has become evident that they present multiple risks in our changing climate. Forests all over the world - particularly even-aged monoculture conifers - are being challenged by the effects of extremes of temperature, wind, and changing rain patterns.

The worldwide movement to plant trees can therefore learn from Ireland in terms of what not to do. There is a difference between creating monoculture plantations and forest restoration - which if done right can have huge benefits for the planet, biodiversity and communities.

**Informed debate**

Yet, some continue to believe that Ireland should persist with the industrial model of forestry, including spruce plantations, which have a short rotation and largely predictable economic results.
with a minimum of interventions. This is being challenged by communities who have increasing awareness about forestry and the roles that forests play in mitigating climate change. This means the Irish government’s ambitious plans to plant more trees is generating informed debate, with locals saying they want to get rid of the Sitka spruce and increase support for continuous-cover forestry based on close-to-nature principles.

A continuous-cover forest (CCF) is one in which the canopy cover is continuously maintained and the soil never exposed. While CCF is not a silvicultural system per se, it can be implemented using various silvicultural systems that do not involve clear-felling. Even-aged monoculture plantations can be transformed into diverse continuous-cover forests with trees of different ages and species however, and a number of pilot programmes have been initiated in Ireland lately, but the impact so far has been small, and it is yet to be seen whether it is the start of the transformation of Ireland’s forests which is needed.

The Green Party successfully passed a motion in the Irish Parliament (An Dáil) to make a fundamental change in forestry policy away from a narrow vision of 30 year cycle to a permanent woodland approach, that would provide greater and more diverse social, environmental and economic benefits to society as a whole.

I manage my small forest of mixed native broadleaves using a CCF plan, and I have also started to transform a Sitka spruce plantation planted in 1987 to CCF, through the following process:

I firstly opened up widely-spaced racks (a path through the forest where the harvester and forwarder machines can pass). This allowed a very light selective thinning to take place, where trees are marked for removal and the best trees are kept. Two subsequent selective thinning interventions have been made at three yearly intervals, and the forest has already begun to regenerate itself. This happens when the forest floor is opened to light, and dormant tree seeds start to grow (particularly hazel, ash, holly and even oak) and natural regeneration starts to take over. After the second intervention, I have also started the so-called enrichment process by planting other shade-tolerant species such as hornbeam, cedar, beech, and hazel.

This process of selective thinning and enrichment together with (hopefully) increasing natural regeneration will continue several more times. There is the inevitable risk of wind-throw to be managed, as the trees become increasingly exposed to the wind. However, I have tried to mitigate the impact by paying particular attention to the edges and also by endeavouring to manage soil drainage – we have lots of rain in Ireland! So far, I am very pleased with the results as very few trees have been lost, which is surprising for such a relatively old plantation.

Greater returns

The question I am often asked is how does CCF compare economically with a monoculture short cycle clear-fell approach?

One of the reasons the Irish government opted for monoculture plantations was because they are predictable. After 30-35 years the trees can be clear-felled (entirely cut down) and the site replanted again. But there are downsides. Replanting costs money. There is also a cost in terms
of carbon, since young trees can't absorb as much as older ones. The climate suffers both from a decrease in the forests' carbon sink, and emissions from the machinery. The income comes principally from the clear-fell and is 'once-off'. In CCF on the other hand, once the forest is established, income will be on a routine cycle of every few years, with the objective of always having a mature tree canopy in place. A good analogy might be, that in a clear-fell you lose all your capital, whereas in CCF you always have it, and take away regular interest.

Another economic advantage of CCF is that regeneration (or regrowth) is natural and free – although from time to time there may be a need for enrichment planting. Overall it would appear that in the short-term income may be greater for a monoculture clear-fell, but in the long term CCF may win out as the emphasis is also on top quality timber.

But there are more compelling reasons why foresters and forest owners are becoming increasingly aware of the comparative value of CCF. The reduced risks associated with climate change (mentioned above), and the richness of CCF from a biodiversity and carbon capture point of view all weigh in its favour.

With monoculture plantations, you use machinery to come in, harvest and replant. You need technical, not forestry knowledge. When you use a CCF approach, selectively choosing trees for their quality, value, longevity and regeneration for example - you need a lot of forestry and woodland know-how.

Irish people were once renowned for their ‘knowledge of trees’ - some say it is the etymology of the word ‘Gael’ (the word for an Irish person). And unfortunately we’ve largely lost that knowledge.

It’s relatively easy to convince a forest owner to go for a predictable 30-35 years approach but much more difficult to promote a continuous cover forestry model that will take almost 100 years to completely set up. The policies needed to encourage the latter aren’t yet in place, but are coming, and as communities increasingly question the current way of doing things, the pressure for change will grow.
Better management of existing forests, enforcement of forest protection laws, restoration of resilient native species – all these activities would do more to help forests play their full role as a Natural Climate Solution.