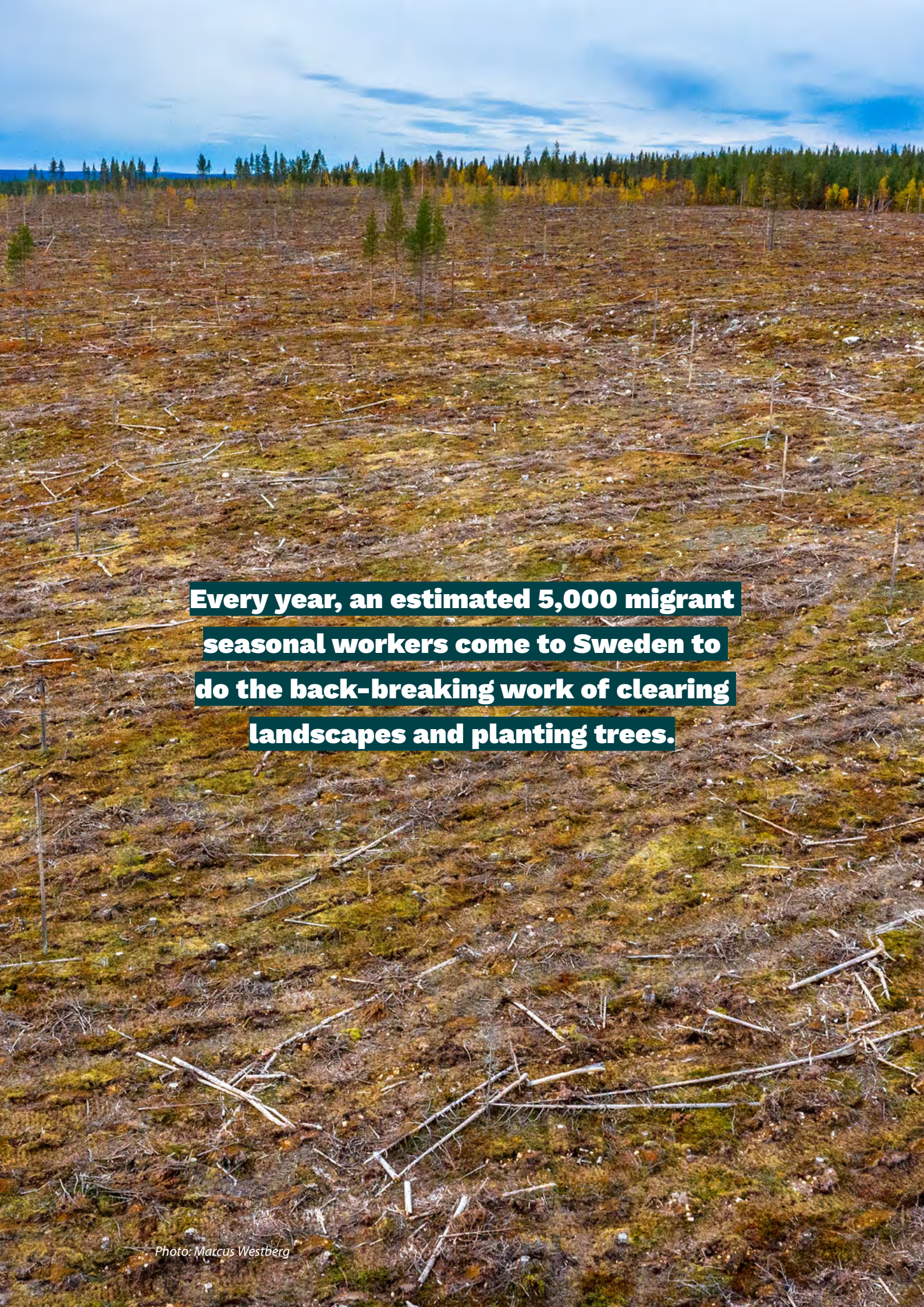


# Duped

The exploitation of migrant workers  
in Sweden's forest sector





**Every year, an estimated 5,000 migrant seasonal workers come to Sweden to do the back-breaking work of clearing landscapes and planting trees.**

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# The damage Sweden's industrial forestry model inflicts on people and nature

Europe's only Indigenous People, the Sámi, have paid a heavy price for Sweden's industrial forestry model. The forest ecosystem that their reindeer depend on has been plundered to such a degree that their culture and livelihood, which has survived for millennia, is threatened. Yet they're not the only people suffering at the hands of a forestry industry that's destroyed vast swathes of Sweden's old growth boreal forests, by clearcutting pristine forests and turning them into monoculture tree plantations. Every year, an estimated 5,000 migrant seasonal workers come to Sweden to do the back-breaking work of clearing landscapes and planting trees. They make up 85 – 90 per cent of the workforce and are employed by firms sub-contracted by the major companies which dominate Sweden's forest sector.

**The mistreatment they face is endemic.**

*According to GS Union, 85-90 per cent of seasonal workers are migrants, doing the exhausting, underpaid work many Swedes are reluctant to do. Photo: Beatrice Lundborg.*



From earning less than they've been promised, to being employed under unlawful terms, from working in poor conditions to being overcharged for their accommodation: the evidence is consistent and overwhelming. When the planting season is over, some non-EU forest workers have remained in Sweden, without documents, housing, money or work – yet unable to return home.

This exploitation is rooted in the economic logic which underpins the Swedish forestry model, and which is also driving its nature destruction. It's a model which seeks large volumes of pulp wood and timber at the cheapest price, regardless of the long-term consequences, and in which profits and margins are all swallowed by the paper and biomass industries, at the expense of the workers at the bottom of the supply chain – as well as the smaller forest owners. Despite growing awareness of the human and environmental harm the Swedish forestry model is causing, the industry continues to promote itself as a beacon of sustainability. And in doing so, it has the unwavering support of much of Sweden's political class.

## Thwarting EU forest policies

The latest manifestation of this support has been on show throughout Sweden's Presidency of the European Council. The Presidency - by definition – is meant to be impartial. Yet when it comes to EU forest policies, it's very clear that Sweden has not lived up to this obligation.

Instead, it's thwarted policies that could act as brake on its intensive, clearcutting model: from bulldozing key revisions out of the Renewable Energy Directive (RED), to going back on a deal to have a climate target in the Land Use, Land-use Change and Forestry Regulation (LULUCF) that other EU members had agreed to.

Nevertheless, the harm caused by the intensive forest management methods deployed in Sweden – and other Member States – can be reversed. And the EU's new Nature Restoration Law, which is currently being negotiated, offers a crucial chance to do so. It is the first comprehensive continent-wide law of its kind, and aims to restore Member States' ecosystems. Instead of a forestry model built on clearcutting, it could promote one which benefits nature, as well as the workers employed in the industry, and small forest owners. One way it could do so, is by including binding forest restoration practices such as close-to-nature forestry, thereby putting people and nature first.

**The ravaging of the natural world and the exploitation of migrant workers under the intensive forestry model, are inextricably linked.**

**A truly sustainable forestry model requires stopping both.**

## The environmental cost of the Swedish model

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**3/4**

THE AMOUNT OF **OLD-GROWTH FOREST** SWEDEN HAS LOST SINCE THE 1950S.



**1/4**

THE AMOUNT OF **UNPROTECTED OLD GROWTH FOREST** LOGGED IN SWEDEN BETWEEN 2003 AND 2019



**72 %**

OF FORESTS IN SWEDEN ARE **LESS THAN 100 YEARS OLD.**



**3 %**

THE AMOUNT OF FORESTRY IN SWEDEN THAT **DOESN'T INVOLVE CLEAR-CUTTING.**



## BROKEN DREAMS

*Every year a total area a third larger than Greater London is cut to the stump.  
Photo: Marcus Westberg.*

# How the Swedish forest industry is crushing the hopes of migrant workers

A chance meeting at an environmental protest in their native Poland was the unlikely starting point for Ryszard and Wojciech's journey into the seamy side of the Swedish forest industry. A man approached one of their friends at a demo with the enticing prospect of well-paid seasonal work in Sweden. They would get to spend their time in nature and accommodation would be provided. Their friend couldn't do it because of family commitments,

but Ryszard and Wojciech could.

*"I was really short of money at that time and wanted to go abroad and work,"*

Ryszard recalls, speaking over Zoom with his friend Wojciech. Wojciech was attracted by the "environmentally friendly" nature of the job: planting trees.

But their illusions were shattered soon after they arrived in Uppsala, central Sweden. They had been told they would be paid by how much they planted. But laden with bags of

saplings weighing 30 or 40 kilogrammes (kg), and trudging across terrain which was overrun with tree stumps, they struggled to plant a third of the target they'd been set. Even the experienced planters they were working with were struggling, and Wojciech and Ryszard calculated that they wouldn't be able to earn the Polish minimum wage, let alone the equivalent of the 12,000 Zlotys a month (around Euro 2500-2600) they'd been promised. Their supervisor's response was blunt: *"We were told we must worker harder and longer,"* said Ryszard. *"We were getting very worried,"* said Wojciech. They started digging on the internet and discovered that it was unlawful to pay forest workers by planting volume. When they questioned their supervisor about this, he threatened them with the sack.

### Depressingly familiar

This prompted them to contact the [GS-facket Union](#), which represents forestry, wood and graphics workers, where they were put in touch with Kimmo Vaveniemi. Vaveniemi found their story depressingly familiar: a vast amount of his time has been consumed by dealing with such cases in the past five years. Less common was that Wojciech and Ryszard spoke English well enough to be able to discover what

their rights were, then fight to get them upheld. *"The union's biggest challenges are the language barriers [preventing many forest workers from Ukraine, Romania, Poland and elsewhere] from knowing their rights, and that we have a different system regulating the labour market to the rest of Europe,"* says Vaveniemi.

In Sweden, wages are determined by collective agreement, and there's no statutory minimum wage. Vaveniemi quickly established that the sub-contractors employing Ryszard and Wojciech had deliberately violated their collective agreement. They had also overcharged them for their accommodation. On behalf of the GS Union, Vaveniemi managed to secure compensation for Ryszard and Wojciech for the four and six weeks that they'd worked respectively. *"It's more common than not that sub-contractors are violating collective agreements when it comes to planting and brushing, and that workers don't have the possibility of reaching their targets,"* Vaveniemi says. *"It's sad because it's human exploitation."*

### Overwhelming evidence

All the evidence shows that this exploitation is rampant. From a long catalogue of [cases](#)

***"We were told we must worker harder and longer. We were getting very worried."***

RYSZARD, MIGRANT WORKER FROM POLAND



that the GS Union has documented and taken up, to recent newspaper exposés [see interview with Lisa Röstlund, page 13] and academic analysis, evidence that migrant workers in the Swedish forest sector are routinely mistreated, is overwhelming. Stories abound of workers lured by false promises, who are then paid deplorably under unlawful terms by the businesses sub-contracted by the big companies who dominate the Swedish forest industry, and who own many of the forests.

As far back as 2013, reports emerged of Cameroonian migrant workers being exploited. This included the story of a man who'd left his homeland to spend six months planting trees in northern Sweden, on the promise of a salary which would enable him to buy land back home to start a farm to support

his wife and five children. The wages were far lower than promised. Four years later, the man had no job or work permit, and was stranded in Sweden unable to repay the loan he'd taken to buy his air ticket, and faced the risk of prison should he return. The Swedish forestry sector's reliance on migrants - and subsequent exploitation of them - can be traced to 2005, when a ferocious storm, known as Cyclone Gudrun, devastated the country. Seventy-five million cubic metres (m<sup>3</sup>) of timber was felled, more than in all storms in the 20th century in Sweden put together, according to the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI). Short-term workers were urgently needed to clear the damage, and so the large-scale recruitment of migrant workers began.

Today, around 5,000 seasonal workers are employed in the Swedish forestry sector

*Clear-cutting is not sustainable ecologically, socially or economically. On the contrary, it requires low income and poor conditions for staff, contractors and small forest owners.  
Photo: Wirestock Creators / Shutterstock.*



every year. A 2019 [study](#) found that 97 per cent of workers in the ten largest forestry companies (by revenue) were migrant workers, 82 per cent of whom were EU citizens (mostly from Latvia, Poland, Romania), as well as Ukraine, before Russia invaded their country. According to GS Union, 85-90 per cent of seasonal workers are migrants, doing the exhausting, underpaid work many Swedes are reluctant to do.

### Large volumes, as cheap as possible

The contractors employing them are just one cog in the wheel of exploitation. *“As we see it, a big issue is the forest owners, the big companies, because they push the price of the subcontractor down. So many subcontractors don’t have the possibility of following rules and agreements because the prices are so pressed. That’s actually the key to the problem,”* says Vaveniemini.

This point is echoed by [Marcus Westberg](#), an award-winning photographer who’s documented the extreme stress that nature is under around world, including in his native Sweden. Westberg says that the Swedish forest industry, which is often inseparable from the paper and biofuel industries, *“want large volumes as cheaply as possible”*.

To achieve this, he explains, timber prices in Sweden are kept artificially low. *“The state-owned forestry company, Sveaskog, logs huge volumes, even at a loss, to swamp the market and bring down prices. Profits and margins have been moved to the paper and biofuel industries, and there’s even less money further down the supply chain, meaning that forest*



*Clearing in Swedish forest.  
Photo: Amy Johansson*

*workers aren’t paid standard Swedish wages.”* In October 2021, the European Commission [raided](#) Swedish and Finnish wood pulp manufacturers because of *“concerns that the inspected companies may have violated EU anti-trust rules that prohibit cartels and restrictive business practices”*. A more recent Sveriges Television (SVT) [report](#) reinforces Westberg’s claim, stating that Sweden’s large

**“The state-owned forestry company logs huge volumes, even at a loss, to swamp the market and bring down prices”**

MARCUS WESTBERG,  
AN AWARD-WINNING PHOTOGRAPHER

forest companies jointly keep pulp wood and timber prices “unreasonably much lower” than in surrounding countries, by paying half as much to Swedish small forest owners [see also, interview with Leif Öster on page 16].

## Relentless harvesting

Sweden’s forestry model - in which forests are thought of as agricultural fields to be relentlessly harvested and replanted by a stream of cheap foreign labour – is anything but sustainable, says Westberg. This is as true for nature, as for the people doing the hard work at the bottom of the supply chain. “The forestry industry claiming it’s sustainable is like the oil industry denying climate change, or the tobacco industry saying there’s no link between smoking and cancer,” he says.

Only three per cent of Sweden’s forestry doesn’t involve clear-cutting, and every year a total area a third larger than Greater London is cut to the stump – destroying the habitats of threatened species, which has led to both a biodiversity crisis and a startling drop in Sweden’s forests’ capacity to sequester carbon dioxide [see box page 15].

Around two-thirds of Swedish forests are certified – meaning the companies operating in them are obliged to respect social obligations, including collective agreements, as well as environmental standards. Yet given how dire the standards of both are in Swedish forestry, in Westberg’s view certification is “largely a marketing gimmick”.

Kimmo Vaveniemin of the GS Union sees no signs of the exploitation of migrant workers abating, despite the war in

Ukraine leading to a sharp drop in the large number of Ukrainians who previously filled the sector, while knowledge of the grim realities of forestry work in Sweden is also spreading among other Eastern Europeans. “They [the forestry industry] are looking for countries in Africa and Eastern Asia to exploit. There are always more countries to exploit. That’s the sad truth.”

Meanwhile Ryszard and Wojciech want to raise awareness of what happened to them, as a warning to others. Their experience has deepened their perspective on the negative stereotypes of migrant workers that many seem to hold. “You hear about foreign workers who are always drunk on vodka,” says Wojciech. “But maybe they just didn’t get the chance for the better life they hoped for and are treated so badly that they turn to alcohol to kill the pain.”

[Wojciech and Ryszard are pseudonyms.]



**“There are always more countries to exploit. That’s the sad truth”**

KIMMO VAVENIEMIN  
OF THE GS UNION

An aerial photograph of a logging site. A wide dirt road runs diagonally across the upper left. A dark-colored car is parked on a dirt path that branches off from the road. The ground is covered in a mix of green vegetation, brown soil, and scattered logs. In the background, a dense forest of tall evergreen trees is visible.

MARCUS WESTBERG, PHOTOGRAPHER

**“The forestry industry claiming it’s sustainable is like the oil industry denying climate change, or the tobacco industry saying there’s no link between smoking and cancer”**

LISA RÖSTLUND

## The journalist exposing Sweden's forest sector myths



**Lisa Röstellund has probed Swedish society's underbelly for 18 years.** As one of Sweden's leading investigative journalists, she's shone a light on the nefarious activities of far-right extremists, and uncovered scandals in hospitals, schools and oil companies for the country's major national newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*. She expects to receive pushback from those she writes about, yet even such a seasoned reporter was shocked by the backlash she got from Sweden's forest industry when she started scrutinising the sector.

### Radically different fate

Her path to playing a key role exposing the myths surrounding Sweden's forestry model and its damage to nature and people, began in 2020 when she travelled to Sweden's Arctic north to do a story on eco-tourism industry and the Indigenous Sámi people. There she witnessed the devastating impact that clear-cutting forests has on the landscape, tourism and the Sámi. Boreal primary forests are being razed and replaced by monoculture pine plantations, with a disastrous domino effect.

Tearing down old growth forests destroys the lichen that the Sámi's reindeer survive on, which in turn threatens a way of life that has survived for millennia. Once felled, these trees take hundreds of years to grow back, meaning that future Sámi generations will be condemned to a radically different fate to that of their forebears.

*"An alarm went off for me," says Röstellund. "What does it say if reindeer have been able to live from the forests for 10,000 years, but now they can't?"*

The story made her re-evaluate her own views, and the illusions that she - like many Swedes - held regarding the country's record on forests.

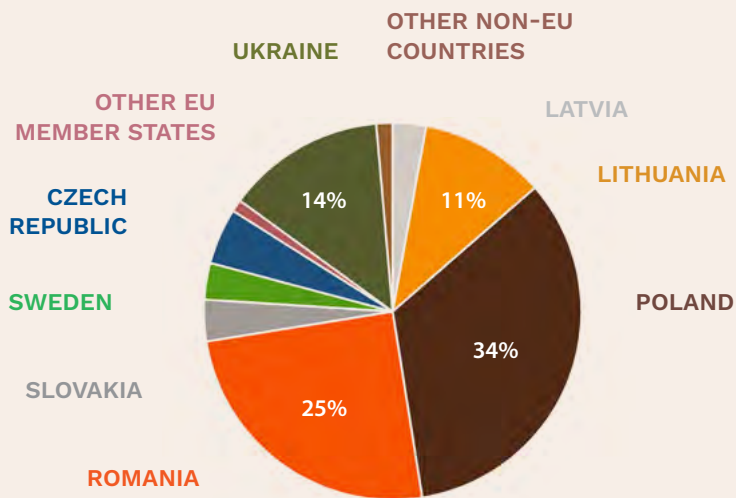
*"I had always thought that Sweden was a global leader when it comes to the environment," she says. This belief unravelled further when a stream of experts - from scientists to environmental activists, from foresters to industry insiders - contacted her in the wake of her story being published, to point her towards other forestry areas worth investigating.*

## Systemic exploitation

Since then, Röstlund has laid bare the squalid reality of Sweden's industrial forestry model, and the myriad conflicts surrounding it, in more than 60 carefully researched and even-handed articles for *Dagens Nyheter* as well as in her award-winning book *Skogslandet: en granskning* (The Forest Land: a review).

Among the injustices she's shone a spotlight on is the systemic exploitation of migrant workers in Sweden's forest sector: the low wages, the late payments, the long hours, the terrible working conditions and even the cheating and betrayal that workers from Ukraine, Poland, Romania, the Baltic states, Thailand and Cameroon routinely endure. As part of her research Röstlund applied for a job using a Swedish name, with one of the major companies. She was told that they only hired Romanians.

**ACCORDING TO A NEW STUDY FROM SKOGFORSK, AS MUCH AS 97 PER CENT OF THE EMPLOYEES IN THE 100 LARGEST FOREST MANAGEMENT COMPANIES ARE OF FOREIGN ORIGIN.**



The share of seasonal workers by nationality in 2019. The category "Other EU countries" includes Bulgaria, Italy, UK, Germany and "Other non-EU countries" includes Afghanistan, Eritrea, Cameroon, Nepal, South Africa, Swaziland and Thailand.

## **“An entire industry has joined forces against me. It feels uncomfortable”**

LISA RÖSTLUND, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST

This, she says, is just one example of how industrial forestry’s unsustainability extends beyond failing to protect nature: *“Certification schemes like FSC [the Forest Stewardship Council] also require [forestry] companies to contribute to the local economy. But when rich Swedish companies only hire migrant workers, who are very often exploited, local workers are completely outcompeted,”* she says.

For Röstlund, the exploitation of migrant workers is a symptom of a wider global economic injustice: one in which companies in rich countries drive down costs and maximise profits by outsourcing production to low wage economies. She says: *“For instance, Sweden’s clothing manufacturing industry was shutdown 20 or 30 years ago, and the work was outsourced to low-paying countries like Pakistan. But Sweden’s forests can’t move, so the work can’t be outsourced to low wage countries. Instead, we import the workers, and the exploitation happens here.”* Raising critical questions about the management of Sweden’s forests has drawn fierce attacks from the industry.

Unable to find factual errors in Röstlund’s work, they resorted to a targeted social media campaign. When she investigated far right extremists, she received death threats, but this was at least as tough, she says. *“An entire industry has joined forces against me. It feels uncomfortable.”* But the public interest in continuing to expose the forestry industry to scrutiny is overwhelming. *“How we manage our forests affects the global parallel climate and biodiversity crises. So we will probably see rising conflicts about who has the right to decide how we manage land. This fated question needs to be out in the open, and we journalists need to continue to follow it,”* she says.



### **FROM 30 TO 25 MILLION TONNES**

**THE AMOUNT BY WHICH THE  
NET STORAGE OF CARBON  
DIOXIDE IN SWEDEN’S FORESTS  
PLUMMETED IN 2021.**

According to the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency’s preliminary data.

LEIF ÖSTER

## The insider lifting the veil on Swedish forestry



If anyone knows the mechanics of Sweden's forest industry, it is Leif Öster. He worked in it for a quarter of a century, occupying various management positions, including Information Manager and then business strategist for the state-owned forest company, Sveaskog, Sweden's largest forest owner. Öster was an expert witness in the last Swedish state forest investigation, and for the past 33 years he's owned his own forest, in which he also runs an ecotourism business.

*"The social effects of today's Swedish forestry are both significant and very negative. For those of us who live in the countryside, the problems with biodiversity are of course important. Unfortunately, however, questions about the lack of economic and social sustainability of forestry are often forgotten. Today's Swedish clear-cutting is not sustainable ecologically, socially or economically. On the contrary, clear-cutting requires low income and poor conditions for staff, contractors and small forest owners.*

*For thousands of years, Swedish forestry was mainly conducted on frozen ground in winter. The fellings were carried out manually and the transport was done by horses. For humans and animals, it was an extremely heavy job. But the damage to frozen nature, soil and water was small. Most often, forestry was conducted close to nature without large clearcuts. Starting in the 1950s, a major transformation of Swedish forestry and the entire Swedish forest landscape began. A huge mechanisation of forestry started, which led to today's fully mechanised forestry where a few machine operators and huge machines have replaced the work of the many people. But big machines are also needed for big clearcuts.*

### Low wages - poor conditions

*Our Swedish trees grow relatively slowly, which gives high-quality timber. So the Swedish forest could be a rural project that creates many more jobs and tax revenues. This requires more processing of timber and less wood at the same turnover. But unfortunately, Sweden has instead built a forest industry delivering large volumes of simple products with a low degree of processing.*

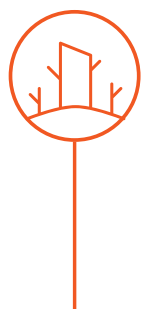


*With fewer small private forest owners living on their forest properties, knowledge of their own forests has also declined. The planting and the cleaning of the young forest that was previously carried out by local people is today undertaken largely by staff from low-wage countries. At the same time, Swedish forest companies have dramatically reduced their own staff, which means that the planning for various measures in the forest must take place very quickly and sometimes not at all. Planting new trees and later clearing them is still manual and labour-intensive. Initially, all such work was carried out by local labour, but with increasingly poor wages and conditions, no locals today want to carry out these jobs. Instead, Swedish forest companies import the workforce from low-wage countries, through intermediaries who sometimes pay low wages and offer poor working conditions.*

## **Forest owners without profitability**

*A central part of early mechanisation was that the forest companies owned the machines and machine operators were employed by the companies. In order to reduce their costs, forest companies in the 1980s began to lay off their own employees and instead let the machine operators own their machines and work for the companies as contractors. This change has brought with it many negative effects: The companies are pushing down their harvesting costs so that the small entrepreneurs have to work harder and more. In addition, the entrepreneurs take all the risks. Financially pressured contractors must work even if there are high natural values or a high risk of soil damage or fire. The technical development of more environmentally friendly machines has largely ceased as no contractor has finances for research and development.*

*The Swedish forestry model is based on volume and low processing. A prerequisite then becomes that timber prices must be very pressured and low. The profits are made in industry and the countryside is paid very poorly for the timber. **Very few of Sweden's 310,000 forest owners can make a living off of timber sales.***



## **50 YEARS**

THE TIME IT WILL TAKE FOR SWEDEN'S LAST UNPROTECTED OLD GROWTH FOREST TO DISAPPEAR AT THE CURRENT LOGGING RATE.



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*Timber stumps being loaded onto a truck in Tidaholm, Sweden. Photo: Lasse Johansson / Shutterstock*

