



The Role Of European Forests In A Global Context

When you picture Europe in your head... do you think of forests? You should; forests cover over a third of the total land surface of the European continent. Compared to other regions in the world only South America has a higher percentage of forest cover than Europe. The area of forests in the pan-European region has continuously increased since 1990 and continues to increase.

And it is not only the area covered by forests what is increasing; progress has also been made on the implementation of sustainable forest management in the European region, with an increasing number of countries with improved national forest policy instruments.

And more forests, and a wider implementation of sustainable forest management, mean more environmental, economic and sociocultural benefits for the society and the people. More sustainably managed forests signifies more stable soils, more (and higher quality) water resources, more habitats for forest species, more protection against natural hazards such as floods, landslides and avalanches, more opportunities to supply forest products and to create jobs related to forests and the forest sector... In short: more opportunities for sustainable development.

The role of FOREST EUROPE, the voluntary high-level political process for forests in Europe, has been essential to enhance the cooperation on forests policies and to implement sustainable forest management across the continent. The achievements of FOREST EUROPE in its 25 years of existence also show the need to keep on working together to address at a regional level the challenges related to forests.

But the challenges for European forests are not limited to Europe; some of the most relevant challenges affecting European forests are, actually, global. Only international collaboration and political commitment will make it possible to address these global challenges at a regional level.

Consequently, at the 7th FOREST EUROPE Ministerial Conference ministers responsible for forests in Europe will commit to increase efforts and strengthen cooperation to face these challenges, and ensure the multifunctionality of the continent's forests for the long term.

European forests: Fighting (and adapting to) climate change

Climate change is one of the most relevant challenges affecting forests at a global scale, and so it is also for forest ecosystems in Europe.

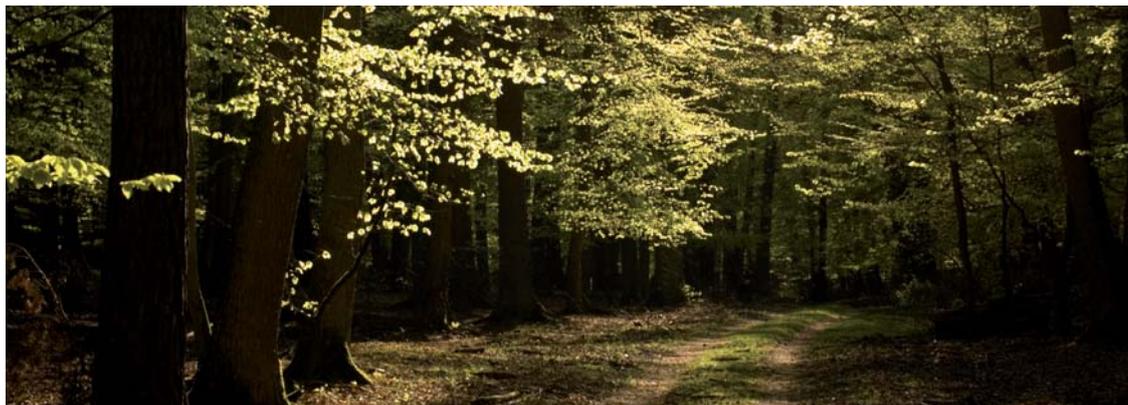
Forests are vital to mitigate climate change. They absorb large amounts of carbon from the atmosphere and store it in forest biomass and soils, as well as in forest products.

At the same time, forests are and will be affected by climate change and its associated effects, which include increasing temperatures, variability of rainfall, and more extreme events, such as storms, floods, fires or droughts.

In this equation, in which forests play an active role in mitigating climate change and are simultaneously influenced by its effects, sustainable forest management is clearly the way to adapt forests to climate change while at the same time ensuring their mitigation effect.

Understanding the crucial role of forests and sustainable forest management in combating climate change is especially relevant now, due to the United Nations negotiations which are under way to develop a new, global, legally binding agreement to combat climate change and encourage the transition towards low-carbon societies and economies. This puts particular emphasis on both mitigation (that is, the reduction) of greenhouse gas emissions and adaptation to climate change. The new agreement will be adopted at the Paris Climate Change Conference in December 2015 and will enter into force in 2020.

The coherence of policy decisions affecting forests in Europe and the agreement reached to fight climate change at a global level must be ensured to guarantee its success, and this will be supported by the ministers at the 7th FOREST EUROPE Ministerial Conference.



Key messages

- Europe is one of the most forested regions in the world.
- Forests play an essential role in the well being of European society.
- The implementation of sustainable forest management increases the benefits from forests and helps to address global and regional challenges for these ecosystems, notably climate change and social and economic development, as well as for the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
- The work carried out by FOREST EUROPE during its 25 years of existence has been essential to strengthen and implement sustainable forest management in Europe.
- Cooperation among countries, as well as among international organizations and processes working on forests and related areas and sectors that might have an impact on them (climate change, biodiversity, desertification, energy, rural development, agriculture, etc.), is indispensable to ensure the multifunctionality of forests.

Key facts

- Forests cover 215 million ha in Europe, which represent 33% of Europe's total land area.
- Forest area in Europe has continuously increased since 1990 and continues to increase.
- Forests are key in combating climate change: Between 2005 and 2015 the average annual sequestration (that is, capture and storage) of carbon in forest biomass reached 719 million tonnes CO₂ in the European region. This corresponds to about 9% of the net greenhouse gas emissions by the European countries.
- A forest policy document exists in practically all FOREST EUROPE countries. The number of countries with a formal 'National Forest Program process' in Europe has almost tripled since 2007.
- Most forests in Europe have a management plan: over 155 million hectares of forests are under management plans, representing over 70% of the forest area in Europe.