

# Preface

The idea for this book emerged during a conference for forest policies and economics in Padua, Italy, where Dainis and I met for the first time in 2005. While we enjoyed the Italian hospitality, we both found the human aspect lacking in most of the conference talks. Can numbers really explain everything in the relationship between people and forests, and can forest policy help us realise our dependency on forests? We were tempted to look back to the roots of society, cultural evolution and the role which forests and trees have played in the life of people throughout history. We were wondering about ancient values that may have become part of our subconsciousness, but that still influence our relationship to forests and the landscapes they grow within. We discussed how we could collect and combine the knowledge and views from fields other than forestry in order to cast a different light on our relationship with forests.

Much later, on a train journey through North Germany, I overheard the conversation of two passengers. While the sandy heathland with its light birch groves passed by the window of our compartment, the woman sighed and said how much this landscape still meant home to her, although she had been married happily in south Germany for more than 30 years. For the other passenger the rather flat topography with the poor soils, uncultivated meadows and scattered trees was obviously much less attractive, if not boring. Maybe he came from the Central German Uplands with their forested mountain ranges and fertile valleys, or he was used to the dark spruce stands in the Black Forest.

What is it that makes us choose our favourite landscape – the one we feel most connected to? Apparently, the perception of landscapes is based on more than pure visual experience. It is also formed by cultural links, livelihood and spiritual and emotional bonds. Like forests, landscapes represent a variety of values that let different people perceive the same landscape differently. Many of these values are connected to or supported by the presence – or absence – of trees and forests. Understanding our relationship to forests may therefore help us reconsider our place in landscapes.

In writing this book, we wished to reveal the variety of human-forest relationships from the very beginning of human impact on forests to the importance of present forest functions and values in our lives today. Forests and trees have been essential in the history of European societies. They have contributed to the

development of civilization not only by being an important natural resource, but also by challenging our understanding of the place of humans in nature. Moreover, the use of trees has had a strong influence on the development of European landscapes. When exploring our relationship to trees and forests, we should always bear in mind the landscapes which form the stage for this story. Unfortunately, the human-forest relationship has very often resulted in the destruction of forests. The loss of forests from European landscapes has not only been a problem in terms of environmental quality and the supply of resources in the course of history. It has also resulted in the loss of cultural and spiritual values and life quality bound to the presence of trees and forests. However, we will also show examples of how forest exploitation has led to the first initiatives of forest protection. We wish to outline the role of trees and forests in human culture, a role which is both practical and symbolic. The focus of the book is on the European region, but its general idea could be transferred to many other forest region of the world.

Forests have been a natural resource for many essential products in the daily life of human beings. Without wood, and the fire generated from wood, technological development would have been almost unthinkable; the axe with its wooden handle was one of the first tools to pave the way for the modern human being. Agriculture and the plough followed and marked the great step that took mankind from hunter-gatherer cultures to agricultural societies. With the development of social hierarchy, forests came to represent places of authority, often banned for the common man, but owned and exploited by the rich or royal. Furthermore, forests also meant power. Wood has been the material for the ships in which nations explored and conquered the world and fought great wars; those who had access to forests, hence, wood, could build ships, conduct wars and build empires. European naval powers such as the Dutch and the English were lacking enough of their own forest resources for shipbuilding very early on in their development – they had to go east to Scandinavia and Baltic States, especially for masts. The English later got timber from the east coast of America.

This link has been so strong that the word for wood and forest is interchangeable in many languages. Even industrialisation, a development that seemed to have turned people away from nature, depended in the beginning on forests for fire wood and charcoal production for the many furnaces and machines. Today, modern society is built upon buried forests of another era, as coal and other fossil fuels are energy source and base material for most modern products.

Most of these links are well known to us. However, there is also another strong link between people and forests. It can be found in the symbolic role that trees and forests have had through human history. Forests have a central place in our spiritual relationship with nature. Trees have been worshipped in many religions. The tree of life and the tree of knowledge are not only known in Christianity. The oak is just one example of a tree species that is central in many religions and the national symbol of different countries worldwide. Many nations identify themselves with forests and the culture and history related to them. Unfortunately, this has sometimes been exploited by extreme national romantic political movements to justify nationalistic ideas and actions. However, it illustrates the strength that these rather

intangible forest values can have in our lives. As a symbolic place, forests represent the forbidden or the wild, and people living in forests are considered as being different. This perception of forests and their inhabitants is central in many legends and myths. Furthermore, forests and trees have inspired artists through history. As forest cover declined and trees became scarce through overexploitation, artists and writers increasingly turned their gaze on the natural world and expressed societal angst through the medium of Romanticism. Last but not least, our fascination of trees may be related to their size, age and form: their upright position with branches that reach out like arms.

The multiple links between people and forests may have changed through time, but there is also a continuous validity of certain values. Some of the mentioned subjects have already been described in depth in other books, while others are little represented in literature or not discussed from the point of view which is our major concern. While forest resources are typically managed under scientific, economic, political and ecological regimes, in this book forests are also viewed within cultural contexts; through spiritual, philosophical, metaphorical and national “filters”. We do not claim to come anywhere near covering all perceptions of the forest, and we cannot describe the whole range of links that exist between people, forest and landscapes. However, we hope to reveal some new aspects and help our readers think in a different manner about forests and rediscover the fundamental values and functions that forests have in our lives.

The book is divided into four parts that are dealing with the introduction to the topic (Chaps. 1–3), forest use and forest ownership (Chaps. 4–7), forest perception and symbolic values of forests and trees (Chaps. 8–12) and the development of forest landscapes (Chaps. 13 and 14). The last part (Chap. 15) is the conclusion of the book.

The Chapter 1 provides examples of the early significance of wood and trees in human culture and religion, the use of forest symbols for national identification and the exploitation and alteration of forests in Europe. It gives an introduction to the influence of philosophical views, e.g., during the Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism, on our attitude towards forests. The Chapter 2 describes the changing impact of human activity on forests. The interactions between people and forests can be traced back to early human settlements. First mimicking natural processes, human impact gradually changed towards the management and even destruction of forests. From being interwoven with the rhythm of nature, people became more and more a disturbing factor, profoundly changing natural forest ecosystems and the landscapes in which they are located. Against a common understanding of forests as the last wild places and sites of untouched nature, almost all forests in Europe have at some point been subject to human activities. They may even be human creations using introduced tree species, e.g., strategic or industrial timber plantations, parklands and arboreta. In Chap. 3, people’s affinity towards forests and nature is discussed from a philosophical point of view. During the Age of Enlightenment, the dominating attitude was to bring order in nature, with forests being considered as the last realms of chaos and disorder. This was criticised by later philosophers who wanted to strengthen the emotional and spiritual link

between forests and human beings. The chapter looks at the view of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Friedrich Nietzsche as two critics of the ideas of modernity.

The second part of the book deals with forest use and forest functions in the daily life of people. This is closely linked to the question of ownership which determines many rules and rights of forest use. Examples given in the four chapters reach from medieval times to recent developments in forest planning and management. They illustrate how people have made or make use of forests as a natural resource and how this affects the development of forests, for example by leading to overexploitation or protection. This development can be seen in the history of hunting, as shown for Medieval England in Chap. 4. The recreational activity of the aristocratic class contributed in many countries to the protection of forest areas which elsewhere suffered from overexploitation. This chapter also illustrates how closely the use of forests is bound to the question of ownership. While Royal forests were forbidden terrain for the simple peasant, other woodlands were open for common use; indeed, the English word “forest” historically implied aristocratic ownership. Today, different rules can be found in private compared to state-owned forests. However, ownership does not only affect the activities that are allowed for people in a forest. It also affects the values and attitudes that people have to forests. This may result in different management strategies and finally affect the development of a landscape, for example increasing forest fragmentation. The history of forests as commons and the modern development in forest ownership towards small-scale forestry and private forest owners with often urban background are discussed in Chaps. 5 and 6, respectively. Today, the recreational function of forests is experiencing a renaissance, but now for the whole population rather than the aristocratic few. With the development of multifunctional forestry, new forest functions have been introduced. In Chap. 7, the example of Denmark is used to illustrate how the recreational use has become a major economic and health aspect in the planning of new forests.

The third part of the book is focussed on more intangible values, theories and philosophies, in other words on non-productive forest values. It illustrates the symbolic function of forests and trees and how trees influence our sense of belonging and identity. The development of the role of wooden posts, from utilitarian objects to symbolic pillars, and even to their petrified forms of the Classical column (a symbol of power), is described in Chap. 8. It also elaborates the meaning of the thunder gods and their link to oak trees and the sacred pillar as a metaphor, using archaeological, iconographic, etymological and written evidence. Another good example for the use of trees and forests as metaphors can be found in the art of painting. Landscape painting emerged relatively late in history. Although the first recorded description of a painting as a “landscape” can be dated back to the sixteenth century, trees and forests placed in symbolic landscapes could already be found in earlier pieces, often in connection with classical mythology or religious motives. In Chap. 9, different aspects of landscape paintings, including factual and symbolic landscapes, are described by giving examples from various times. The symbolism of trees and forests in paintings and their interpretation is analysed and contextualised. In the following two chapters, the role of forests as place for the

identity of people is explored. Chapter 10 deals with changing historical and geographical perceptions of forests as space and the understanding of forests as places apart and different from our everyday lives. Forests may be regarded as magical places or places of danger. Their inhabitants have often developed a different way of life and cultural system than their neighbouring agricultural societies. It is shown how the cultural understanding of forest has changed relatively little over time, in contrast to many production-oriented forest values. The contribution of forests and their rich materiality to the development of identities is elaborated in Chap. 11. This includes aspects of sounds, light and smells. The discussion reaches from global identity, considering Earth as our home planet, to regional and individual senses of identity and their cultural and political role. Chapter 12 gives a theoretical approach to the terms *landscape* and *forest*. The terms are multi-layered, and their meaning has changed through time, almost like the development of landscapes that can be observed in the physical world. Essentially, the use of these terms is still highly dependent on the individual context. A short introduction to their etymology is given together with examples of their use in a present context.

Finally, in the fourth part of the book, changes of forest landscapes are described and related to the use of forests and trees. In the history of agricultural societies, forests occupy a central role in many European countries. Chapter 13 is about the development of a landscape related to changes in land-use, population density, and the use of tree resources in a rural area in south-east Sweden. It illustrates how the presence and form of trees and forests in landscapes are highly dependent on the value and benefit which they have in the life of people. In Chap. 14, visual characteristics of forests landscapes in Europe are identified in order to give the reader an idea of the diversity of forest landscapes, but also their general similarities. From densely forested landscapes to open agricultural lands with few wooded landscape elements, the importance of tree-related land use as a landscape forming factor is discussed. Based on landscape attributes such as complexity, contrast, and the degree of openness, different forest landscape types are described. The aim is to illustrate how the cultural use of forests has formed the visual appearance of landscapes; a knowledge that should be used in future landscape actions.

The book ends on a concluding note, summarizing the major points of the different chapters with focus on the changes that have occurred in the relationships between people and forests through time and the contrasts and contradictions that can be found in the definition and understanding of forest and landscapes. It gives perspectives on future developments regarding our use of forests and the role of non-productive functions in our relationship with forests.



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