

Preface

Despite the fact that many foreigners might not be aware of it, Portugal is a much forested country with 35 % of its land covered by forests. This was not so during the past few centuries. Portugal is a paradigm for many western and southern Mediterranean countries that have incredibly increased their forest area during the past one and a half centuries. The main reasons for that are linked to deep socioeconomic changes characterized by the accelerated shift from a rural to an urbanized society. Marginal agriculture that poorly sustained a large part of population has been abandoned since the late nineteenth century and forests have recovered either spontaneously or by active planting.

Portuguese forests comprise three main forest types: the Mediterranean ever-green oaks (*Quercus suber* and *Quercus rotundifolia*) generally in the form of open grazed forests (so-called montados) dominating the hills of the center and south, the pine forests (*Pinus pinaster*) of the center-north and *Eucalyptus globulus* plantations in the coastal northern part of the country. Whereas Mediterranean oaks have dominated those landscapes for centuries, the local pine species was used massively to afforest abandoned agricultural land and pastures in the late nineteenth century and the first 6 decades of the twentieth century. *Eucalyptus* was introduced on a commercial scale in the 1960s and has expanded considerably since then despite the considerable controversies surrounding this species.

The most important threat of the Portuguese forests is forest fires due to strong seasonal changes between a humid winter and a Saharian summer exacerbated by climate change. Extended forest fires are the most evident proof of the impressive growth of the forest vegetation over the past few decades.

Another challenge is the extreme scattered nature of the forests, which are approximately 90 % privately owned. This factor exacerbates the lack of profitability of Mediterranean forests and the risk of extended fires. Tackling these two interrelated problems is one of the priorities of the near future.

Despite these problems, the forest sector is one of the pillars of the Portuguese economy, the first world producer of cork and a significant producer of high quality short fiber pulp and soft wood sawn wood.

But for sure, Portuguese forests are more than their production side or the risks they face. Portuguese forests host considerable biodiversity, protect the soil from erosion and regulate the water cycle while providing quality landscapes for tourism, which is a pillar of the Portuguese economy.

Portugal has been quite active in the international area, especially in the Pan-European forest process (today Forest Europe), hosting the III Ministerial Conference (Lisbon, 1998) where the criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management were agreed. Portugal has been efficient in attracting and investing EU resources into its forest sector since its entrance in the EU in 1986.

Portugal has been recently affected by a severe financial crisis that is generating considerable social hardships. Forests and its associated sector need to be placed in the center of the political attention due to its potential contribution to overcome the crisis as a source of endogenous green employment and rural development. New thermic uses of forest biomass, innovative products from wood or cork and environmental services upgrading tourism and life quality should be high priority. While their potential is unquestioned, there is still a need of political will and alignment in order to fully unlock it.

This book offers the opportunity to deepen the knowledge about the Portuguese forests. I invite you to discover them as part of a fascinating journey. Forests are consubstantial part of a greener and inclusive future.

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Forest Context and Policies in Portugal

Present and Future Challenges

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