



Almost half of the European land mass is covered by forests and the number is increasing. In addition almost all forest areas are open to the public. Europeans love their forests for recreation, culture and of course for its economic benefits.

“Generally, European forests are in pretty good shape”, says Richard Aishton, who is coordinating a project to improve Forest Law Enforcement and Governance in the European Neighborhood Policy East Countries and Russia. “In the last twenty years European forests have grown, and I’m actually quite impressed with the EU. They seem to understand the long term value of maintaining their forests and the new trade law that will be effected in 2013 explicitly mentions biodiversity in our forests”, Aishton adds.

### **The middle and the edge**

All is not rosy however. Even though Europe’s forests are growing, they are in fact more fragmented than ever. Instead of having forests stretching over vast areas we have a lot of small forests here and there.

“So statistically it looks good”, Aishton says, “but if you have one leg in a bucket of ice water and another leg in a bucket of boiling water, your average temperature is ok, but you will not feel pretty good.” It is the same with the forests of Europe, Aishton explains, “we have a lot, but they are not continuous and that’s where the problem with biodiversity comes in. A small forest cannot maintain a diverse ecosystem, the deep forests can, and that is what we’re lacking,” according to Aishton.

“We need what’s in the middle of the forests to maintain the biodiversity; right now we have a lot of edge, but not so much middle. And we need biodiversity for its own sake. When a forests has a diverse ecosystem it can sustain other changes, like climate change, better. That is, in order to have forests, we need biodiversity in our forests, or else we might lose the ones we have because they cannot cope with change”, Aishton maintains.

### **Sustainability – an unattainable goal?**

According to the report ‘The State of Europe’s Forests’ published in 2011 by FOREST EUROPE, and co-authored by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United



Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), we are getting closer to a green forest industry. More of European forests are being utilized sustainably and economically our forests are very important.

“I think that’s true”, Aishton says, “but I think that’s only one part of Europe. When you look at Eastern Europe, and consider that about 80% of all forests in Europe are in Russia, I’m not so sure the picture is that flattering. We did a project in Moldova for example and it turned out that

they were cutting and processing more than they were growing, and that's not sustainable", he says. "The worry is that these numbers didn't show up until we came, and suggests it could be similar stories elsewhere", Aishton adds.

Aishton thinks here is where the biggest effort should be put in. To make sure that all of Europe actually maintain their forest industry in a more sustainable way. "In some parts of Europe you would have to use a lot of money to become a little bit greener, but in other parts we could use a little bit of money to become much more green."

So are we heading for a totally green and sustainable forest industry? "I think that's actually an unattainable goal, but we can get greener, and the greener we get the more sense it makes", Aishton says and adds, "We have a lot of sustainable forests in some parts of Europe, but we could be better in other parts."

### **Tax incentives**

For the most part, though, Aishton is optimistic. He praises European citizens and the fact that many European governments actually have green political parties is a sign that we are going in the right direction.

“I think the average person in Europe is well aware of environmental issues”, Aishton says, “and the emergence of green parties is proof of that.”

So what can the average person do, to help save our forests? “Well, we could recycle... more, I mean in my local supermarket in France there are all kinds of different trash cans and deposits for different waste, but a lot of people just put everything in one can. So we could get better at that, but at the same time I think the governments of Europe should give tax incentives for living a more environmentally friendly life”, Aishton argues. In order to keep our forests biologically diverse and to extract their resources in a sustainable way, both the governments and the people of Europe have their part to play.