

Some Finnish forest owners do not believe in biodiversity loss while for others it is a crisis

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Numerous surveys of forest owners have found that private family forest owners in Finland value nature and biodiversity. However, such findings tell us more about the general ideals of Western culture than about forest

owners as protectors of biodiversity.

A study of [forest](#) owners conducted by the University of Eastern Finland's School of Forest Sciences and Department of Geographical and Historical Studies along with the University of Helsinki's Department of Forest Sciences identified three common modes of thought that forest owners use to conceptualize maintenance of [biodiversity](#) and their own role in that process. These modes of thought also reflect different ideas about sustainable forest use among family forest owners, who hold control over the use of two thirds of Finland's forests.

Just under 40 percent of forest owners fall back on a mode of thought which calls for them to do no more to promote biodiversity than the law requires. They may agree to management measures recommended for their commercial forests by forestry professionals to appease them, but they do not perceive a genuine need for these measures.

"To this group, the problem of biodiversity loss doesn't exist, and concerns about the environment are seen as unrealistic fringe ideas held by nature conservationists. Modern ideas about sustainability are not part of this mode of thought," explains Tuomo Takala, a researcher at the University of Eastern Finland.

For the next 40 percent of forest owners, the standard measures for taking biodiversity into account in cutting operations, such as a buffer zone on the shoreline or a group of retention trees left in a clear-cut area, leave a positive feeling that they have done their part to conserve biodiversity. Habitats of endangered species can also be saved in cutting operations without any opposition as long as these habitats are known beforehand and are not too large or many.

"To this group, finding existing areas of high nature value and preserving

them in an economically optimal way is precisely what is meant by conservation of biodiversity. Thanks to the best forestry in the world, there cannot be such a thing as biodiversity loss here," Takala elaborates.

In practice, these forest owners prefer to leave responsibility for conserving biodiversity to the forestry professionals planning the cuttings. This multi-objective forestry outlook is also the mainstream view of sustainable forestry in Finnish forest policy.

"We can think of it as a weak-sustainability model that approaches the different dimensions of sustainability equally in principle, but in which commercial forest use ultimately sets the framework that conservation efforts operate within."

The two modes of thought above illustrate two ways in which forest owners keep the unpleasant idea of biodiversity loss out of their sight, even if biodiversity loss in Finnish forests is well documented and frequently raised in the media. These and other manifestations of biodiversity loss denial, should be discussed more—just like climate change denial was discussed in the recent past.

Biodiversity loss is only a reality for a fifth of forest owners

One in five forest owners views the loss of biodiversity as an emergency.

"According to this mode of thought, we are quickly destroying our forest nature," Takala explains.

"According to this group, the way we use forests needs to be changed fundamentally and quickly, either voluntarily or through further regulation. Especially old-growth forests need to be removed from

commercial forestry use in significant numbers. Specific sites of high nature value and areas where endangered species currently exist aren't the only things worth preserving—some sites where endangered species could settle in the coming decades should also be saved."

Considering the needs of nature gives concerned forest owners a framework within which they can plan their commercial forest use in a way that prioritizes the ecological dimension of sustainability over the commercial dimension. These forest owners take the responsibility of conserving biodiversity into their own hands. They do not outsource it to the forestry professionals who plan their cuttings, knowing that conserving biodiversity is not the primary task of these professionals.

"In this strong-sustainability mode of thought, the most impactful decisions from the biodiversity perspective have already been made before any forestry professionals enter the picture."

All the aforementioned modes of thought naturally include the conviction that they are the correct way of looking at the situation. It is important to notice that individuals cannot simply jump from one mode of thought to another at a whim.

Paying more attention to environmental concern and sensitivity

The modes of thought discussed above pervade all discussion on the environmental effects of forestry. When, for example, the EU's taxonomy, rooted in a strong-sustainability mode of thought, meets the weak-sustainability mode of thought prevalent in mainstream Finnish forest policy, conflict is inevitable. Some are in a state of emergency, while others see no problem at all.

"To understand and manage the conflicts and the polarized conversation, it's essential that we learn how to separate these two ways of conceptualizing sustainability in forest use. The idea of one sustainability—a single goal shared by everyone—obscures our fundamental differences of conception, narrows political discussion and hamstrings our attempts to make considered decisions," Takala explains.

Understanding this difference is particularly important for those making decisions about forest use. By asking whether we and our forests are in a state of environmental emergency, and whether we need to fundamentally change how we use forests as a result, is a good way of examining our differing conceptions of sustainability.

"At the simplest level, this is about the different values and levels of environmental sensitivity people have. Too often, we still think of conflicts regarding forests and the solutions to those conflicts as simple informational challenges," the project's researchers note.

Where to start with strong-sustainability forest services?

The study found that interest in new forest services that concentrate on nature is surprisingly common among forest owners—far more common than concern over biodiversity loss. If we want to promote strong-sustainability thinking among forest owners, we should emphasize service products that allow forest owners to examine nature in their own forests and work together with nature professionals to plan their forest use with the needs of nature as the starting point.

Additionally, it is high time to develop new forest planning and advisory services in which commercial forest use is planned in the framework of biodiversity maintenance instead of the other way around and to offer

these services alongside current forestry planning and advisory products. Such strong-sustainability forest services are currently not available in Finland.

"The personal experiences produced by forest services could be an effective way of increasing people's sensitivity to environmental issues. Of course, they would also give forest owners more information about nature and their own values, but information alone is not enough—information about biodiversity loss is already out there for anyone to find, as long as they're prepared to take it in."

"The most important thing a strong-sustainability forest service model can achieve is getting forest owners to ask themselves what they can and are ready to do for nature."

The research was published in *Forest Policy and Economics*.

More information: Tuomo Takala et al, Discursive barriers to voluntary biodiversity conservation: The case of Finnish forest owners, *Forest Policy and Economics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.forpol.2021.102681](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2021.102681)

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