Forest policy needs action to improve outdoor recreation

Although national and European policy supports the importance of outdoor recreation, there are few binding commitments for action, according to new research. In particular, monitoring of recreation in forests is rarely mentioned in national policy and the study suggests comparable European data could inform firmer decision-making.

Forest recreation, such as woodland walking and wilderness experiences, has been increasingly recognised for its contribution to societal well-being. There are several policies dealing with outdoor recreation in Europe which provide guidelines, such as the EU Forest Action Plan¹, and the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund² which provides financial support to improve outdoor recreation.

The study evaluated forest recreation in national policy and legislation in Europe by gathering expert opinion. The expert panel for this study were recruited through the COST Action E33 network³ and consisted of 30 members from 18 European countries. They were mainly researchers, scientists and recreation managers.

One of the main outcomes of the research was a dataset of national forest policy documents and legislation. For the 18 European countries, all experts identified National Forest Programmes (NFP) as important forest policy documents for outdoor recreation. NFPs are outlined in European legislation to help guarantee sustainable forest management. All the countries, excluding Belgium and Greece, had an existing NFP or were developing one. 14 countries mentioned outdoor recreation as an objective of national forest strategy.

The experts identified two main types of legislation, other than NFPs, that are relevant to outdoor recreation: forestry legislation and nature protection/conservation legislation. All 18 countries had forest law and in 13 countries these referred to outdoor recreation. Six countries did not refer to outdoor recreation in forest and/or nature protection/conservation legislation, which were all Nordic and Northern European countries. In these countries, specific regulations apply. Monitoring was mentioned in forest law in Finland and Cyprus.

The researchers organised the countries into clusters according to their policies. Countries that assigned a higher political importance to outdoor recreation in forests were Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France and Germany. Those who considered it of medium importance were Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Slovakia, Switzerland and the UK. Greece, Iceland and Sweden gave forest recreation low priority.

Countries were also clustered according to their pattern of policy instruments. Nine countries addressed forest recreation through NFPs, forest policy and other policy. These were mainly Central European countries. The remaining nine used different combinations of these three types of policy. Interestingly, those countries with a low priority for recreation had a higher than average forest area per capita, whilst countries with little forest tended to prioritise recreation. This could be because stronger policy tools are needed where there is high competition between different land use alternatives.

The study suggests a contradiction between expressed political importance of forest recreation and the loose commitment to action. Monitoring is rarely part of policy and could provide useful and comparable data on which to develop action.

2. See: http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/fin/index_en.htm
3. See: http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/coste33/homepage.htm


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