The present size of the European Union exceeds 319 million hectares, and with the accession of the 10 candidate countries this will increase to 393 million hectares. Of this, 40% of the land mass is agricultural land and in excess of 38% is forest - thus almost 80% of Europe is “rural land”. In Western Europe approximately 66% of forests are on private estates and much of the agricultural land is on the estates or farmed by owner-occupier farmers. The role of private owners is therefore crucial to the well-being of the European countryside.

European policy, in addition to national, has considerable impact on rural estates. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has greatly influenced economic decisions on land use, but major changes are underway. Although the timescale of change may be lengthy, we were concerned to find out how the estate owners were adapting to change as they faced agriculture's move to unprotected global markets, and looked to diversifying their economic base from the more traditional agriculture and forestry Europe's environmental policies also have a particular effect on the rural estates. Our starting hypothesis was that it was Europe's private landowners who were the true guardians of the countryside; it was their stewardship that was conserving the species, habitats, and landscapes that are so highly valued by society. Yet there is a growing amount of European environmental legislation that seeks to prescribe future land-use and land management. This is often at odds with the enterprise and land-use choices of owners, or involves costs that cannot be covered.

We wanted to see how this potential difficulty between the state and private owners was resolving itself on the Estates themselves in terms of conservation and biodiversity. The passing of recent decades has witnessed much demographic change in the countryside. In some parts of Europe many people have left the countryside for the towns, reflecting changes in traditional rural industries and job opportunities. In other parts there has been a reverse; some have left the towns for a more tranquil life in the countryside. Without doubt there is an “opening up” of the countryside, with considerable wider public interest. Sometimes this is reflected in traditional tourism but more recently in a growing trend of “eco-tourism”.

How well is this pressure being accommodated, and is the very object of the public's interest at risk from the increased activity? In selecting the individual Estates we have tried to take into account European diversity in terms of people, geography, history, size, flora and fauna, landscape, land-use, and enterprise. We visited the Estates, talked to the owners, their managers and staff, took our photographs, and sought the leads to our further researches before we started writing.

From the north to south, from east to west, we found some amazing Estates and met some remarkable people. The 61 chapters reflect big and small Estates, some have been in the same family for centuries, and others are recent acquisitions. Some are very traditional, whilst others are very contemporary; but all are involved in managing change, sometimes on a significant scale. We have included 2 Estates from the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, to show examples of how they are addressing change.