

NEW EU FOREST STRATEGY

CHALLENGES AND MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS FROM REDBOSQUES PROJECT

Natura 2000 Network is the cornerstone of the EU's biodiversity conservation policy. Forests represent 50% of the area protected by Natura 2000, therefore improving their conservation status is a priority for the EU as a whole and for its member states. In this sense, the new 2030 Biodiversity Strategy and the European Green Deal developed by the Commission are relevant opportunities to put forest conservation on the international agenda.

European forests - and in particular the Mediterranean ones - are at a crossroad. After centuries of very intense use followed by abrupt abandonment, most of the forest area is today formed by young or rejuvenated masses, with a very simplified biodiversity, which are particularly vulnerable to disturbances such as large fires and pests. This vulnerability is accentuated in a scenario of climate change, which suggests higher temperatures and more intense droughts.

Both inaction and continuist policies lead us to a dead end. It is therefore a priority to act so that our forests, essential for the well-being of society, are in a good state of conservation that ensures their long-term survival. For this, the protected areas and the Natura 2000 Network are preferred scenarios in which to develop new forest policies.

Some of the **challenges and main lines of work to be developed** in the most immediate future around forest management are:

- In a context of generalized rural abandonment and loss of profitability of the timber exploitation of the forest, it is necessary to value the set of services that forests provide to society. For this, a greater variety of objectives must be incorporated into forest management, such as biodiversity conservation, recovery of ecological processes or adaptation to climate change.

It is necessary to adopt a strategic point of view with long-term objectives, and a broad territorial scale - which exceeds an approximation at the farm or wood scale - as an opportunity to move towards a new management model. This includes the need to consider the forest on a landscape scale, as a heterogeneous mosaic in which the different phases of the silvogenetic cycle and the associated ecological processes are present.

- Knowledge of the dynamics of Mediterranean forest ecosystems in terms of forest maturity and its relationship with the disturbance regime (especially fire) needs to be improved. Existing models, based on boreal and atlantic forests, must be adapted to the reality of landscapes that are periodically affected by high intensity disturbances.

- Forestry is a powerful tool for improving the conservation status of the forest, and in many places it can be used for this purpose. But it is necessary to promote a change of mentality at all levels, from the decision makers to the planners and the staff executing the actions on the ground, to incorporate new objectives into the traditional management. For this, it is necessary to improve the training of all the actors involved, from the political to the technical level.
- In this context of restoration of the ecological functionality of the forest, it will be necessary to identify and characterize the last existing mature stands, because of their uniqueness and their importance as reservoirs of biodiversity and as referents for a forestry that promotes greater heterogeneity and diversity, and by both greater resilience.
- Once identified, in some places it will be necessary to ensure their effective protection through appropriate legal instruments. This includes a wide range of possibilities, from legal protection in some places, to forest planning instruments or voluntary agreements with owners. The last mature stands should be part of a nationwide network, integrated in turn into international networks.
- Forest management aimed at improving conservation status should become an opportunity to obtain financial resources. For this, it is necessary to improve the dialogue with European fund managers in order to incorporate appropriate actions and criteria for biodiversity conservation in the implementation of the measures of the Rural Development Programs.
- A forest management aimed at achieving this variety of objectives requires the participation of all the actors involved in forest management, especially both public and private owners, making them partakers of the need to improve the state of forest conservation, more beyond the direct economic benefit. In the current context of climate change and a greater incidence of disturbances such as fire or drought, the management of these risks and the maintenance of the property in a good state of conservation should be an incentive for the management of the forest.
- Forestry oriented towards mitigation actions must be carefully assessed in order not to conflict with biodiversity values and the preservation of the full array of services forests provide. Forests cannot be seen only as biomass producers nor carbon sink. Carbon neutrality of bioenergy is under high debate in the academic arena, and mitigation projects based on forest biomass might be developed in a case by case basis.

- It is necessary to better communicate the value of forests in general and mature stands in particular, and of the different management options necessary for their conservation (from non-intervention to active management), as a means to gain support for their conservation . This communication should be addressed to society in general as well as to decision makers and forest owners.