

How Social 'Demand' Overlaps in Forest Management A Sociological Analysis of the Relation between Forest and Society in France (1960-2005)

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Introduction

The 2001 French forest policy pointed out sustainable and multifunctional forest management: two catchwords in which appeal to society. The same law recognized the social value of forests for recreation and nature tourism: “to satisfy social requests related to the forest”. However, what do we mean by ‘social demand’ related to the forest? Which place is really made for society, visitors and recreation in France? The role of the individuals, the importance of the forest for them, needs to be questioned. It is essential to approach the ‘social’ component in a comprehensive way.

This knowledge exists in France, but is often spread out and uncoordinated. The data are sparse and/or targeting very specific objectives. This paper wishes to present research started in 2003 at the request of the National Forestry Office (ONF).

We will focus here on the results of the first phase (a theoretical and analytical one), and also demonstrate how that analytical survey served thereafter to structure the national survey of 2004 and localise qualitative investigations. In analysing those various data, we wish to guide forest managers in their quest to understand and answer fine visitor perceptions, needs and expectations. Indirectly, in methodological terms, we want to map out relevant methodologies and remarks in order to strengthen our understanding of the forest-society relationship.

Methods

For this study, we constituted an initial database of 215 documents that were analyzed according to a contents analysis scale. The ‘state of the art’ of the main surveys held between 1960 and

Table 1: Main French Survey related to the relation between forest and society since 1960.

Main French Survey related to the relation between <i>forest and society</i> since 1960		
1969	SARES	Regional (Ile-de-France)
1973	Ballion / INSEEs	France
1971-73	R. Ballion	Regional (Ile-de-France)
1973-79	INRA d'Orléans	Regional (Ile-de-France)
1991	BVA for ONF	France
1992	BVA for DERF	Urban Woods
1996	IFEN / CREDOC	France
1997-1998	Inra, Nancy	Regional (Lorraine)
1998-1999	CREDOC	Regional (Ile-de-France)
2000	SOFRES for La Collective du Bois et de la Forêt	France
2000	IFEN	France
2000	Forêt Méditerranéenne	Regional (PACA, Languedoc-Roussillon et Corse)
2001-2002	IFEN	France
2002	Laboratoire d'Économie forestière de Nancy	France
2004	ONF	France

Table 2: Selected results drawn from the latest survey related to forest and society (ONF, 2004).

<p><i>Selected results drawn from the latest survey related to forest and society (ONF, 2004):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ One of the natural spaces most attended during free time and the holidays. ✓ The frequentation still correlated with the socio-professional status + education level. ✓ Walking remains the principal activity in forest, but followed closely by gathering. ✓ Users are not willing to contribute financially for the costs of management... but seem ready to take part in voluntary actions. ✓ Men's and women's forest attendance is considerably different (motivation, location within the forest space, activity...)

2003 shows two major moments: 1969-1980 period when the forest was apprehended as a consumer good, and the 1990s when, influenced by the raising of environmental concerns, the relationship to the forest became more individualized.

The forest, paradigm of nature, has become a symbol of frailty. The images of deforestation of Amazonian forests and forest fires become entangled with the local woods. The public opinion changed vis-à-vis the forest resource. Nevertheless, recent studies (ONF 2004) show that today practices remain sensibly the same ones as those observed in the 1960s.

Since 1960, the forest is a place 'out of the city' and is appraised as such by the urban population, which composed 62 % of the population in 1960 (76% in 2003). The compilation of data lets us understand what could appear paradoxical; one would hunt for the 'natural' aspect while at the same time seeking a certain infrastructure.

Results

It is difficult to grasp roughly, what is hidden under the concept of 'social demand'. In analyzing chronologically the various results from the 1960-2004 investigations we observed – regardless of a new sensitivity to the environmental concerns – stability in forest activities and still a strong symbolic attachment to the forest.

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Before considering the development of indicators and variables suitable for the measurement of behaviour evolution related to the forest, it appeared vital to understand the main social tendencies that had crossed that field. In France, in social sciences, this theme had been given a rather short-term and sparse scientific production.

In analysing what has been done since 40 years, in highlighting stable and changing behaviour, we will be able to formulate more accurate prospective lines for future forest management. Understanding 'social demand' is a work in progress mainly because 'society' is also in perpetual movement.

This type of results appears necessary in this period of 1) participative management, 2) forest demand for leisure, 3) critical reasoning by the population regarding forest exploitation. Today forest management is in transformation; forest actors must adapt themselves to new standards that are directly related to forest production, to environmental standards and to societal transformations. Today's new era brings in a multi-functional forest, a space in perpetual transformation.

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