

The gap between science and forest management

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Good forest management is based upon three pillars: a long-term vision, terrain knowledge and professional knowledge. It is the obligation for every forest manager to have a solid long-term vision and constantly work on his/her terrain and professional knowledge. In this paper I focus on the professional knowledge on recreation issues. The aim is to stress the need for more research on recreational issues in forest management, the effective communication of existing expertise and the development of practical tools, methods, concepts, etc. in this field.

The professional knowledge of forest managers covers a broad range of subjects from wood production to biodiversity, and from cultural heritage to recreation. It is impossible for forest managers to have an expert-level professional knowledge on all these aspects of forest management. In practise, some forest managers, especially those of large nature conservation organisations, are supported by experts, but most forest managers have to depend on their own expertise. How good is the professional knowledge of Dutch forest managers concerning recreational issues?

Recreation has been a mayor forest functions in the Netherlands since the 1950's when people had more free time and money to spend and mobility increased. Since then many scientific studies have been conducted and you would think that by now recreation policies and management in forest areas would be based upon thorough scientific facts. However, teh reality is different. There are forest managers, sometimes supported by experts from their organisation, who have a profound knowledge on recreational issues, but in general the professional knowledge of forest managers in The Netherlands is rather poor. In those cases recreation policies and management measures focusing on recreation often lack a scientific basis and are based on the personal perception of forest managers. This does not necessarily mean that things go badly wrong, but there is certainly room for improvement.

For example, forest managers are responsible for biodiversity. If they have to decide on a permit for a recreational event, they have to take the possible negative effects of this event on biodiversity into account. However, relatively little research has been done on this subject and the available information is scattered and non-specific. And even this information is not easily available to forest managers. In many cases they decide with the limited professional knowledge they have on the impacts of recreation on biodiversity. Several managers of community forests on the Veluwe have recently decided to develop a decision making tool for recreational events in their forests that does take environmental, social and ecological factors into account. Many recreational policies for forest areas are discriminating to some user groups, such as mountain bikers and equestrians. There can be good reasons for such a policy, but often these decisions are not supported by scientific facts. The chosen measurements are therefore not necessarily most effective and efficient.

There are three possible reasons for the lack of (scientifically based) expertise of forest managers on recreational issues:

- There is no scientific information available.
- There is scientific information available, but this is not easily accessible to forest managers. Scientific information is often available in a large number of detailed research reports. It is very time consuming to read these reports and therefore not pursued very often by forest

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managers. Furthermore, the results are often not 'translated' into practical implications for forest management. The scientific information does not reach forest managers.

- The information is available, but forest managers do not know about it.

In the first case more scientific research is needed. In the second case 'translation' of scientific results to the practise of forest management is necessary and the communication of this information to forest managers. The translation of scientific results can be in the form of recommendations for forest management but also as methods, concepts, decision tools, systems etc. The main criterion is whether it is directly useful for forest managers. More effective communication is needed in the last case.

References

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