Forest-preferences and recreation in Switzerland: Results from a nationwide survey

Marcel Hunziker, Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research (WSL), Switzerland, hunziker@wsl.ch;
Jacqueline Frick, **Nicole Bauer**, **Eike von Lindern**, Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research (WSL), Switzerland

Introduction

Around 30% of Switzerland's surface area is covered with forest and these represent an integral part of the population's everyday landscape. It is, thus, important for politicians and planners at all levels to know how the Swiss population relates to forests so that they can best promote and maintain various forest functions as well as habitat quality for the public. The relationship between the Swiss and their forests has been explored in several studies, particularly as part of the so-called "Socio-cultural forest monitoring" (WaMos) in 1997. In this report, the follow-up project, WaMos 2, is described. WasMos 2 explores the relationship between the population and the forest on three levels: (1) their attitudes to and (2) their knowledge about the forest and forest policies as well as (3) their behaviour, e.g. when visiting forests or buying wood. In addition, WaMos 2 is intended to develop the content and methodology of WaMos further, and establish it as a reliable tool for social forest monitoring.

Method

To meet the above-mentioned goals, a representative survey of the Swiss residential population was conducted (N=3022, response rate 32%) by means of computer-assisted telephone interviews (with option to switch to a web-questionnaire, which was chosen by 41%).

Results

Descriptive results of 2010 to be compared with those of 1997

Study findings indicate that respondents value the forest's recreational function very high, but not as high as other forest functions like timber production, protection against natural hazards, and biodiversity. The forest's productive function was rated substantially more important compared to 1997.

We also found that respondents prefer the forest to be diverse, legible, coherent and mysterious. Study participants did differentiate between concrete forest attributes such as the existence of dead wood, species distribution, infrastructure elements etc. Most of the forest preferences indicated by respondents and aligned with what study participants perceived to be the actual state of forest conditions.

Most respondents tended to be wrong regarding their perception of the development of the forest area, i.e., to believe that it was decreasing instead of increasing in size. The proportion of people who assessed the development correctly has, however, increased markedly since 1997. The health of the forest was commented on very positively and its development was assessed much more positively than in WaMos 1.

The findings about respondents' attitudes to forest ecology indicate that they perceive the forest as a habitat that is threatened. Not only was pollution mentioned as a threat but so too was housing development and climate change.

The majority of respondents assumed that natural hazards that cause damage are increasing, whereas in WaMos 1, a slightly smaller proportion expected such natural hazards to increase.

Turning to forest recreation, we found that the Swiss visit the forest on average once or twice a week in summer and once or twice a month in winter. This pattern has remained virtually unchanged since 1997. However, people today tend to engage in a wider variety of activities. This might explain that proportionally more reported being disturbed when spending time in the forest. But most said they nevertheless enjoyed it and felt recovered afterwards. Their motives for going into the forest appeared to be mainly to "experience nature" and to "being active and keep fit", as well as to a lesser extent to have a "social experience". These motives fit well with the activities they report.

Results of regression models to explain the observed attitudes of 2010

How the Swiss relate to the forest in general is greatly influenced by their fundamental values, i.e., their general environmental orientation and their forest preferences, which affect almost all aspects of the human-forest relationship. Socio-demographic and spatial variables, such as forest ownership or how close the forest is to residential areas, appeared to have less influence on the human-forest relationship. Switzerland's regional division into different language regions and forest zones often affect aspects of the human-forest relationship. This means that regional characteristics and results specific to the region should be taken into account when designing measures and policies.

Discussion of some methodical issues regarding monitoring

The objective of the project was not only to repeat the investigation carried out 13 years earlier, but to improve the questionnaire to become a more systematic and theory-driven monitoring instrument. Thus, there was the trade off whether the questionnaire items and scales should be improved, which meant that comparability with the data of 1997 was reduced, or leaving the items untouched which often implied accepting methodical problems that have shown up after 1997. We tried to find the right balance,

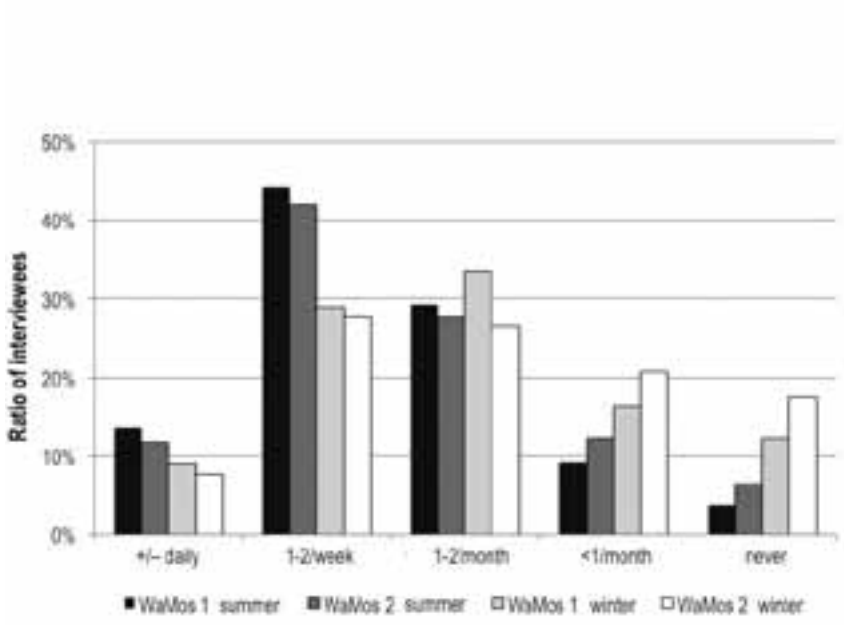

Figure 1. The frequency of forest visits did not significantly change from 1997 to 2010, neither in summer nor in winter.

but are forced in many cases to prevent ourselves and the target audience from over-estimating the differences, as the data were gathered slightly differently.

Another major issue is the reduced response rate, from 55% in 1997 to 32% in 2010. As the quality of the data about households in Switzerland could be improved since 1997, the non-systematic drop-outs (phone number not valid, language problems etc.) were reduced from 20% to 14%. At the same time the systematic drop-outs increased from 26% to 53%, mainly caused by rejection (increase from 17% to 44%). The latter development is unfortunately very common in Switzerland. It might be caused primarily by overwhelming direct-marketing activities. The problem is even more serious if the increasing number of households without conventional phones (and with only cellular phones that are not registered and, thus, not possible to be included into the sample) were taken into account. At the same time, using the internet to interview people increases some dimensions of validity. It decreases the average age of the mostly over-aged samples. Thus, using the internet might produce more representative (undistorted) data in the future than using telephone or mail-out surveys only.