The future of the Flemish land- and forest owner and the role of the landowners’ organization

Vincent Dierckx de Casterlé
Acting Chairman, Landelijk Vlaanderen, Flanders Landowners’ Organisation

North of Belgium, with a total population of 6.200.000 people and a small territory of only 13.500 km² has one of the highest population densities in all of Europe with an average of 450 inhabitants/km². It has only a small 1.500km² (150,000 ha) area covered by forest and nature which represents only 11% of the total space available. 70% of the total forest area is owned by private owners, who own on average 2 ha. Of the total forest area 50% are deciduous forest, 36% coniferous wood and 14% a mix of both.

For Latvia we see here that forests account for a large share of the land and cover about 44.4% of Latvia’s surface.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Surface (millions ha)</th>
<th>% Forest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Forest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1 707</td>
<td>851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>851</td>
<td>543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>962</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.R. Congo (ex-Zaïre)</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flanders</td>
<td>1,350</td>
<td>0,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>2,86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other part of the world</td>
<td>6 918,6</td>
<td>1 446,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This low percentage of forest and nature in Flanders is caused by continual grabbing of the open space for new allotments, industrial zones or new highways causing inevitable disintegration of many rural landscapes. This split-up of lands and forests has a very negative impact on the quality of life for the human being and animals and the overall quality and biodiversity of our forests. First, it massively interrupts sustainable management of the nature and the country side. Second, it increases the risk of a complete disappearance of old generation, beautiful privately managed rural estates, and third it generates a constant high social pressure in favour of more recreational usage of the remaining nature and forest which again generates more pollutions and less biodiversity… etc.

This situation is not very enviable for any other EU member states. Still, already a lot of progress has been made.
Private landowners, together with the public administration, want to work for better spatial arrangements. They all have – the government and private partners – the ambition for a more sustainable development of the environment. The first ambition of the Flanders private landowners is durable development and preservation of their surroundings. They want to preserve and to develop the open space, nature and forest and this at any cost. Landowners request the government and the administration to protect and save irreplaceable private nature and forest sites, private historical monuments and their valuable and exceptional landscapes. Space is limited in Flanders.

The future of the land and forest owners will not only depend on how well space will be used and protected but also by accepting private investments in rural sites as the best and the cheapest way to guarantee durable developments of the environment for future generations. Private companies and private owners are ready to invest money and time in forest management but they receive little or no response.

The amount of forests in Flanders will only increase again if government creates new space for private initiatives, private investments, private entrepreneurships and creativity with more consistency and long term visions.

Private forests are actually mostly assigned to different protected areas: habitat areas, Flanders Ecological Networks, ecologically valuable areas, Natura 2000 and many other environmental areas. Each of these have different rules, regulations, obligations, prohibitions and - yes - even possibilities of penalties if the landowners do not comply with all these complex regulations. Legal security for landowners is totally missing and for this reason no or very little investment are made in the countryside.

Private forest and landowners want that private initiatives should be protected, promoted and supported

In the past and since establishment of the Kingdom of Belgium in 1830 landowners invested, borrowed funds, used their money, fortune, knowledge and time to manage their land as sustainably as possible. They had ambitions and a large mission: managing their forests, their land and nature with care and love, with hard work and expertise, with daily and yearly efforts and responsibilities. Every landowner, small and large, was an entrepreneur trying as hard as possible to support and protect the quality of the countryside from one generation to the next. Their personal commitments were to generate and produce all kinds of natural food products, raw materials like wood but also the preservation of all kinds of natural habitats, cultural heritages, the variety of the landscape and, of course, biodiversity.

With their professional actions and initiatives, many landowners carried out excellent and varied social contributions, and still now in the year 2006, many landowners in Belgium are proud about their achievements.

The Flanders landowners’ organization is trying hard to remind government and the administration that the best-managed and best-protected forest-estates still belong to private owners. They are green jewels since generations and they are proud of it - this is for sure! Therefore they ask to be recognized as fully well-managed estates. They also ask equal treatments and rights like all other nature conservation groups. Financial help and support to manage their forests should be very helpful for the nature, our children and the next generations.
The Flanders landowners’ organization is also in full negotiation for exemptions of all inheritance duties on all well-managed estates.

**Legal security, trust and an excellent communication with the government and administration need to be restored and improved**

The assignment of all kinds of different protected areas and regulations without any cooperation or consultation of the landowners creates, since many years already, a lot of frustration and de-motivation. Landowners face year by year an increasing loss of legal securities. For the Flanders landowners’ organization, the loss of legal security is not just a lack of basic respect for landowners, but a fundamental misunderstanding of democracy and basic rights for all landowners and forests managers.

The Flanders landowners’ organization wants to restore these basic rights. One important key factor was missing: communication between our members, the administration and the government. At this present time we are proud to say that at all levels, communication start to be excellent and significant progress has been made.

The Flanders landowners’ organization wants to restore trust, understanding and legal security for private landowners. But we need time, understanding, a lot of work and political stability.

**The transmission of the private estate to the next generation**

Most property is family-owned and most of it will at some moment be passed on to the next generation. The forest is indeed a wonderful link between the past and the future. But will the next generation be ready for this challenge?

Tax charges became in Belgium and in Flanders a real problem: each new regulation and restraint generate supplementary costs, risks, loss of legal security, more rules and paperwork and perhaps the most important, the everyday increasing social pressure on the private forests. Of course there are a few supplementary incomes, like the production of wood and a few others like hunting and fishing incomes. Still some landowners use a lot of imagination to decrease their costs and find new challenges to increase their revenue. The Flanders landowners’ organization is aware of this evolution. Most estates do not break even but have a yearly loss. The question is now how to pass on the passion of the forest and private ownership to the next generations?

How to motivate our children if our patrimonies are not profitable? Sustainable management of a site is not possible without profitability. The Flanders landowners’ organization finds it inadmissible that social cost have to be paid by forest owners only. Forests create oxygen, absorb CO2, protect underground water, rest for the human being and animals and preserve biodiversity since centuries in all countries in the world.

General services to the public are generously accepted but it has to be paid by everyone. Therefore it is inadmissible that social costs inherent in forests are only paid by forest owners. In one way or another, general services to the public should be compensated.

**The Flanders landowners’ organisation**
The Flanders landowners’ organisation, Landelijk Vlaanderen, has one important and priority mission: to protect private land ownership, their members, their investments and value of their land, and above all the preservation of private management.

Only then will the value of land and forest be preserved for now and for the future generations and sustainable management guaranteed. The human being is and needs to stay central as the most important actor and value to preserve sustainable management of the nature and the countryside. Historically nice and durable nature has principally been created by man. Private management has no or very little social cost and is one of the cheapest ways to manage the countryside.

Private investments in forest and land will never have a high return. That’s for sure. But human creativities have no limits. Together with all landowners of all Europe and the authorities it is important to find durable and flexible solutions to preserve nature and forest for now, for our children and for the next generations. Never forget to include the human being - he is and will always be the core of sustainable solutions. We need less regulations, less rules or obligations but more stimulations, motivations and higher legal security for all landowners. This a central point!

Shortly, what do Landowners want in Flanders?

- Landowners wants to keep full control of their property, small or large and want an excellent combination between recreation, good ecological management and the right to keep or increase substantially economic resources. These three functions are necessary for a balanced forest management and to protect the value of the real estate.
- Better and an increased legal security for all. They want to be understood, respected and have legal rights and duties like all other nature conservation organisations.
- Forest owners have proved in the past and still today their expertise and professionalism in the preservation of nature and forest. They want to be heard as legal members in all nature and forest organisations and to be included in all authorities’ plans and activities.
- They want back the right to invest in nature, to buy land or forest freely and above all, the right to pass on their land or property to their children or to the next generation. They want to innovate, take their responsibilities not just for their own interest, but also to contribute on collective targets, and above all to avoid disproportionately heavy or legal obligations on their land.
- The role of the man to protect and conserve nature needs fully to be integrated and protected. The role of man, not the ideology, but the human being needs to be put on the highest platform to protect the environment, nature, forests and the countryside.
- Landowners want that Europe takes a large responsibility in forest strategy and take some actions to restore democracy and legal security in Flanders for all landowners, small or larger. WE NEED MORE EUROPE.