

On the healthy trail – Forest recreation and health benefits should play a vital role in forest management

Around 250 researchers from 40 countries meet from 22 to 24 May 2012 in Alpbach, Austria, to discuss future trends and forest management challenges.

(Alpbach/Vienna, 22 May 2012) Research shows that forests influence human health and wellbeing. The use of forests for non-wood services such as recreation and nature-based tourism has already become more important and will play a bigger role in the future – especially in urbanized regions of the world, researchers say. “This offers new opportunities to generate local income and support regional development”, says Ulrike Pröbstl, coordinator of the Task Force on Forests for People of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO). “Today’s forest policies and management”, adds the Professor from the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU) in Vienna, “have to take account of the increasing types and numbers of forest uses”.

Researchers, policy makers and forest practitioners will discuss new trends and challenges in forest management with special regard to human wellbeing and benefits for society from 22 to 24 May in Alpbach, Tyrol (Austria). The IUFRO Conference “Forests for People”, organized by BOKU in collaboration with partners will bring together about 250 experts from 40 countries.

Forests can contribute to human health in various ways. They provide forest derived pharmaceuticals and nutraceuticals, and forest herbs. As “green lungs”, forests protect from air pollution and improve living environments. Furthermore, they are places for recreational exercise with psychological and physiological benefits for people, especially for the population living in urban areas.



“Research has clearly shown a stress reducing effect if people go out and undertake recreational outdoor activities in nature”, says Liisa Tyrväinen, keynote speaker at the IUFRO conference and Professor for nature-based tourism at the Finnish Forest Research Institute (METLA). Studies have indicated that “nature visits are effective if you spend five hours or more in natural green settings per month”. In cooperation with Japanese researchers,

her team is currently assessing how quickly the stress hormone level in a human being is decreasing during outdoor activities. “We need more data from the field to be able to convince the doctors in Europe”, highlights Tyrväinen the importance to establish better links to medical science.

In national and international policy processes, human health benefits of forests have increasingly being acknowledged during the past few years. However there is still a need to strengthen the body of data, for example through recreation monitoring. “In many countries, research drags behind the demand for the use of forests for recreational purposes. It is essential to enhance research in this field in many countries”, says IUFRO officeholder and METLA researcher, Tuija Sievänen, who is currently analyzing wellbeing experiences of outdoor recreation participants in Finland.

“The Conference aims to narrow this knowledge gap by stimulating scientific cooperation and exchange among forest researchers, forest managers, and policy makers to the benefit of today’s societies around the globe”, says Ulrike Pröbstl.

As indigenous peoples and local communities in developing countries have traditionally developed rich ways of using forests, “developed countries can learn from them and their traditional forest knowledge and practices”, says Liisa Tyrväinen. At the same time new approaches from developed countries on generating income from recreational services and nature-based tourism can also help developing countries to create jobs, to protect forest biodiversity, and to avoid the exploitation of forests in an unsustainable way – also with benefits to climate change mitigation.

In order to acknowledge the range of benefits forests can provide, “forests need to be managed by paying attention to sustainability of the bio-physical system and at the same time to the people”, says Janaki Alavalapati, Department Head at Virginia Tech (USA) and conference keynote speaker: “This forests-people interface is dynamic and complex. Addressing the seminal questions – forests for whom and forests for what – is critical for managing and decision-making of this interface.”

In addition to timber production, there are a number of emerging trends such as using biomass in the face of growing bioenergy markets, integrating forests and agricultural systems (e.g. agroforestry) and making use of forests for carbon sequestration.

The **IUFRO Conference “Forests for People”** aims to contribute to finding ways for putting more of those things in concert with human wellbeing and benefits for society. For more information on the program and topics, please go to: <http://ffp2012.boku.ac.at>

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The **International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO)** is the only world-wide organization devoted to forest research and related sciences. Its members are research institutions, universities, and individual scientists as well as decision-making authorities and other stakeholders with a focus on forests and trees.

Photo:

Study tour during an IUFRO All Division 6 Conference in Finland, hiking to Kiilopää.
(Jouni Hyvärinen, Metla)