

The Nordic Myth

State of forest biodiversity in Sweden and Finland

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Nordic myth – State of forest biodiversity in Sweden and Finland

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Cover photo: Kari Leo

(Cover photo: Siberian jay, *Perisoreus infaustus*, a bird species facing extinction in Southern Finland)

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Foreword

Under the terms of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Sweden and Finland have made a commitment to protect biodiversity and to use natural resources sustainably. To achieve this, signatory countries to the CBD have decided on a goal to establish comprehensive, effective networks of protected areas for terrestrial ecosystems by 2010. In the programme of work on protected areas, Finland and Sweden have also committed to, “as a matter of urgency, by 2006, take action to establish or expand protected areas in any large, intact or relatively unfragmented or highly irreplaceable natural areas, or areas under high threat”. Similar and more detailed commitments have also been made under the terms of a number of EU and national legal instruments.

Sweden and Finland hold a large proportion of the remaining high conservation value forests in the European Union. These house a significant proportion of sensitive and threatened forest species. The commitments to biodiversity protection that Finland and Sweden have made are important not only as an expression of support for the principle, but also as a foundation for necessary action to prevent the loss of forest biodiversity in EU.

Unfortunately the governments of Sweden and Finland often ignore their commitments to biodiversity protection. Despite some protection programmes and legislation, the policies of the two countries are primarily geared towards maximization of production in the forests rather than establishing protection for the forest values and legal protection for the high conservation value forests. Government support is given to the forest industry to increase logging and clear cutting although much of the forests of the two countries have already been converted to monotonous industrial landscapes where many threatened forest species are unable to sustain their populations.

This report presents the current situation of the forest in Sweden and Finland and analyzes the weaknesses of the biodiversity protection policies of these countries.

Authors

1. Swedish forests

Sweden considers itself to be a good actor when it comes to sustainable forestry. This is starkly contrasted by the fact that Sweden has never had as little old-growth forests as it has today at the same time as the government has presented a proposal to increase the productivity in the forests and to decrease the allocation for the protection of forests. Sweden is far from fulfilling its commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

More than half of Sweden is covered by forests.¹ Most of these forests are managed and no longer possess high conservation values. Only about 5 per cent of the remaining forests are high conservation value forests.² Over 1 800 animal and plant species in Swedish forests are red-listed and dependent on old growth forests to survive.³ In order to reverse the ongoing biodiversity degradation, between 9 and 16 per cent of

high conservation value forests in Sweden need to be protected.⁴ There is a consensus among Sweden's leading biology scientists that the Swedish forest politics are a threat to the biological diversity in the forest and that the situation is reaching catastrophic proportions.⁵

In 2007 only about 3.1 per cent of the Swedish forests were formally protected from logging as national parks, nature reserves, habitat protection areas and by nature conservation agreements. Merely 1.3 per cent of the Swedish forests below the mountain region were formally protected.⁶

In order to live up to national and international obligations, such as the CBD, Sweden has a legal responsibility to protect the biological diversity and to ensure that forestry operations are carried out in a sustainable fashion.

One of the Swedish environmental quality objectives, "Sustainable forests", states that the value of forests and forest land for biological production must be protected, at the same time as the biological diversity is safeguarded, by year 2010. A recent review of the national environmental quality objectives concluded that this quality objective will not be achieved by either 2010 or 2020.⁷ The environmental quality objective states that 400 000 ha forest should be formally protected between the years 1999-2010. In 2006 only 36 per cent of the productive forest land had been protected as nature reserves.⁸

A number of disturbing trends in the state of the forest environment and forest management is evident. Forests with very high conservation values are being cut down, at the same time as appropriate

care is lacking when logging is carried through. 28 per cent of the loggings on private owned forest land and 20 per cent of the loggings done by forest companies do not live up to the general consideration demands of the Swedish Forestry Act.⁹ The increase in timber prices, makes logging forests with high conservation values even more common as loggers chase greater profits. All these aspects affect the forest biodiversity dramatically. The logging in Sweden has increased by approximately 35 per cent since 1990. The estimated volume logged in 2007 (92 million m³ forest cubic meters) is scarcely compatible with long-term sustainable logging levels necessary for long-term wood production, especially given the current management intensity.¹⁰

1.1 Forest management

Swedish forestry is extensive and has dramatically altered the Swedish landscape. 95 per cent of Swedish forests are, or have been, in commercial use and are strongly affected by systematic forest management. During the last 50 years, forests older than 160 years have decreased by half. Since 1983, forests older than 100 years have decreased with 15 per cent.¹¹



Managed Swedish forest. Photo: Hans Sundström.

1.2 Forest politics

The Swedish government suggested in its budget proposition presented in the autumn 2007 that the allocation for forest protection should be decreased by 47.8

million EUR (450 million SEK) during the coming three years.¹² Even though the annual decrease was not implemented in 2008 the principle decision to drastically decrease resources for forest protection remains in force.¹³ The government has stated that it wants to increase the voluntarily protected forest areas.

Thereby the environmental quality objective for protected forest areas can be achieved in a more cost effective manner. This of course compromises the state's ability to impose quality demands or control possibilities. If a private land owner is allowed to choose which areas are to be set aside, there is a risk that incorrect and insufficient areas are protected. For example, it often happens that areas without productive forest are voluntarily protected to decrease the economic loss. There is also an uncertainty regarding the long-term security of the voluntary protected areas. The land owner can easily change his or her mind and decide to cut down the forest in the future.

The Swedish government has during the spring 2008 ordered the Swedish Forest Agency and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency to evaluate the possibilities of implementing a system similar the Finnish METSO Programme, a model for protecting the forests in the south of Finland based on compensated voluntary protection, in Sweden.¹⁴ The METSO Programme has not been demonstrated to work satisfactorily in Finland. When the program was evaluated in 2006, it was demonstrated that protected areas were small and geographically isolated with conservation areas protected only for shorter periods of time (10-20 years).¹⁵

METSO has been advocated by the Swedish government as a highly cost-

effective proposal. This demonstrates a short term perspective. The cost of protecting areas of high conservation values for shorter time periods will be higher than protecting them permanently, making the METSO programme unjustifiably expensive.¹⁶

1.2.1 Forest proposition

In March 2008 the Swedish government presented its Forest Policy proposition to the Swedish Parliament.¹⁷ The proposition stated that the two objectives of the forest policy, the environmental objective and the production objective, should be of equal importance. However, the proposition primarily emphasized an increased forest production, while the environmental proposals were lacking. The government emphasized increased forest growth, increased production of biomass, increased pre-commercial thinning and an increased use of biofuels. They recommended that a study of intensified forestry should be done and they suggested that the boundary of mountain region should be redefined and moved further north, making it possible to more easily log in areas that are currently defined as mountainous regions. The forests above the mountain region boundary have historically been less subject to clear cutting than the low land forests.

1.3 State of forest biodiversity in Sweden

There are an estimated 60 000 species in Sweden, of which 25 000 are forest species. Of the 1875 red listed forest species, 92 have already faced extinction, 1174 are estimated to be vulnerable or near threatened and 346 forest species are endangered or critically endangered.

These numbers are probably even higher than documented since the overall level

of knowledge is very poor for certain groups.¹⁸

The species loss in the forests is primarily caused by forestry practices – both through direct loss of habitat, but also through indirect effects of forestry such as ditching or mechanical stress from forestry machines and transport. The majority of forest species do not manage to survive in a commercial plantation forest, because of among other things the degraded structure and open micro-climate.



Dead lying wood is essential for many threatened species. *Photo: Olli Manninen.*

Red-listed forest species are too often represented by small and isolated remnants of formally large and dynamic populations of a continuous distribution. This means when individual populations go extinct, there is no chance for re-colonization so the entire species survival is further threatened. Such species are referred to as a part in an extinction debt.¹⁹ This is of a particular concern for species associated with dead wood or other special wood qualities.

1.4 Lack of resources

The Swedish authorities have not been able to establish enough protected areas due to the lack of resources. The Swedish Forest Agency does not have the resources to analyze all the logging plans submitted to them. Even when the analysis is done and areas with

conservation value are identified, the money for protection is often lacking. As a result the Swedish Forest Agency and the County administration board, the two bodies tasked with implementing the state forest protection, are forced to allow logging in some high conservation value areas.²⁰

1.5 Case studies

During late summer 2007, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation did a thorough inventory of 120 forests in northern Sweden.²¹ None of the inventoried forests were protected, even though they all had high conservation values. In total, findings of 6000 red-listed species were documented and mapped. In October 2007 forest felling was already occurring in four of the areas. The following two case studies are forests that were concerned by logging.

1.5.1 Kiskamavaara

Kiskamavaara forest is located 30 km from the city of Kiruna. It was a forest with 101 documented findings of 15 red listed species, 300 years old pine trees and a generous prevalence of dead wood. The government-owned forest company Sveaskog began logging in the area, claiming that they were not aware of the high conservation values of Kiskamavaara.



Coarse standing dead pine tree with traces of fire in Kiskamavaara. *Photo: Olli Manninen.*

The end of this story is unusual: luckily the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation managed to stop the loggings before all of it was completely logged. However, the damage the forest suffered was irreparable.

1.5.2 Mellanbergsmyrorna

Mellanbergsmyrorna was a larger forest area in Sollefteå classified as a core site, where eleven red-listed species, including the vulnerable polypore *Haploporus odorus*, were found.



A dying specimen of the near threatened lichen *Lobaria pulmonaria* on the sallow (to the right in the picture), that has been left on the clear-felled area of Mellanbergsmyrorna. Photo: Hans Sundström.

The forest was logged by the forest company SCA. The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation documented the destruction of the forest. Pine tree stumps that were 300 years old were found, trees with bird nesting holes and older deciduous trees had been logged, and dead lying wood had been crushed by the logging machines.



The large old-growth forest Mellanbergsmyrorna was clear cut, without general consideration. Photo: Hans Sundström.

Mellanbergsmyrorna was a clear example of logging in high conservation value forests.

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2. Finnish forests

Finland is keen to present the country as a model for sustainable forestry. However, there is a biodiversity crisis in Finland, forest management being the greatest threat to species diversity.¹ Hundreds of forest species are threatened and their state is expected to get worse in the near future.² Finland is also logging some of the few remaining large, intact old-growth forest areas despite their commitment to significantly reduce the loss of biodiversity and protect such intact areas in highly natural state.³ As a wealthy nation with excellent scientific knowledge of its forests, Finland could indeed be a model of biodiversity conservation and sustainable forest management. Unfortunately this is not the case with recent political decisions taking the country only further from achieving this goal.

Finland is the most forested country in the EU.⁴ Forests are the primary habitat of almost half of Finland's species.⁵ Intensive

forest management, strongly encouraged and subsidized by the state, has significantly changed the structure of Finnish forests. Natural forests have been clear cut and replaced by uniform managed forest plantations, often monocultures of pine (*Pinus sylvestris*). The amount of old and dead trees as well as the diversity of tree species and habitats have decreased as a result of clear cuts and forest management that aims at an even-aged forest stand.

About 4,5 per cent of Finnish forests have been strictly protected, most of this in northern Finland.⁶ In southern Finland only 1,5 per cent⁷ of forests are protected and much of the protected areas have been severely affected by forest management as well.

Forest management is the most serious threat to biodiversity in Finland. Species such as the flying squirrel (*Ptemorus volans*), three-toed woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*), Siberian Jay (*Perisoreus infaustus*) and hundreds of plants and

invertebrates have been unable to sustain populations in managed forests.



Siberian jay, *Perisoreus infaustus*, a bird species facing extinction in Southern Finland. This bird is photographed in a forest marked for clear cutting by governmental Metsähallitus in Pahalamminvuori-forest area in municipality of Virrat, April 2008. Photo (c) Kari Leo.

Altogether 564 forest species are classified as threatened and 416 as near-threatened in the Finnish assessment of threatened species, most of these as a consequence of intensive forest management and habitat loss.⁸ In reality, the number of threatened species is probably much greater as the status of 65 per cent of all forest species could not be assessed because of insufficient information on their populations. The Finnish Environment Institute has estimated that the number of threatened forest species will increase in the next assessment of threatened species, due for publication in 2010.⁹

2.1 Old-growth forests

One of the major impacts of the government policy of promoting intensive forest management has been the rapid reduction in the size of Finland's ancient or old-growth forest areas, some of the last fragments left in Europe. Old-growth forests differ from industrial forests in terms of their multi-layered canopy structure, the presence of dead trees of various ages and the occurrence of species that are no longer found in abundance in industrial forests. These forests are

therefore essential for maintaining forest biodiversity in Finland.

Less than 5 per cent of Finnish forests remain in a natural state or close to a natural state. A great majority of these old-growth forests are in northern Finland on state land. Only about half of them have been protected.¹⁰ In the south, old-growth forests exist only in extremely small fragments. However, high conservation value forests that have retained some of the features of old-growth forests and thus support populations of threatened species do still exist, mostly outside protected areas. These fragments are usually too small to remain viable and need to be enlarged and restored.

Four protection programmes for old-growth forests were implemented in Finland during the 1990s, two in the south and two in the north. Whilst the programmes attempted to preserve some valuable examples of natural forests, their impacts were limited, not least due to the lobbying efforts of the forestry sector and the perceived economic value of allowing logging to continue. Decisions about protection were primarily based on political considerations rather than on scientific analysis. In total the programmes set aside 343,000 ha, although much of this land was already protected, had logging restrictions in place or had been classified as unproductive land. Effectively the programmes resulted in protection for an additional 80,000 ha of old-growth forest in the north and 28,000 ha in the south. This represents less than 0.5 % of Finland's forest land area. The protection programmes left hundreds of thousands of hectares of old-growth forest available for industrial use, including some of the largest areas of old-growth forest in the northernmost part of the country, the Saami homeland, which was arbitrarily excluded from the programmes.

Moreover, many of the old-growth forest areas that remained unprotected have since been shown to hold significant populations of threatened species.

2.2 Large intact forest areas still threatened

In 2006, a group of NGOs released a report describing the largest and most natural state, unprotected old-growth forest areas in Finnish Forest Lapland area.¹¹ These eight areas are highly intact old-growth forests with diverse forest close to a natural state. The areas consist of a mosaic of natural forest and swamp habitats. Hundreds of occurrences of threatened species have been found in these areas. Trees that have begun growing in the 16th century are common in the forests. All of the areas are state owned.

The CBD programme of work on protected areas (COP 7 decision VII/28) urges countries to "as a matter of urgency, by 2006, take action to establish or expand protected areas in any large, intact or relatively unfragmented or highly irreplaceable natural areas, or areas under high threat, as well as areas securing the most threatened species in the context of national priorities". Despite Finland's commitment to this, state forest enterprise Metsähallitus still continues to log the few remaining areas in Finnish Lapland that fulfill these criteria.

In February 2007, 77 Finnish researchers appealed to Minister of Forestry to stop logging in these areas. By the end of May 2007, already 252 researchers and scientists had signed the open letter. The signatories who represent a broad range of disciplines including specialists in forestry, biology, economics, ecology, geography and cultural research conclude that "...present and intended loggings in forested Lapland are unsustainable and in obvious conflict with the biological diversity conservation

agreements to which Finland is committed."¹²

2.3 Biodiversity crisis in southern Finland

Finland, as an EU member state and signatory to the CBD, has committed to significantly reduce the loss of biodiversity by 2010. In the programme of work on protected areas it was also declared that countries should establish and maintain by 2010 "comprehensive, effectively managed, and ecologically representative national and regional systems of protected areas" for terrestrial ecosystems. In light of these commitments, it is surprising that the government has done hardly anything to improve the far from sufficient network of protected areas in southern Finland.

Most of the forests have now been converted to monotonous industrial forestry. As a result, the number of threatened species in the southern has significantly increased. Recognition of the urgent need for greater forest protection led to the establishment in 2000 of a working group including scientists and government representatives. This group concluded that the state of forest biodiversity in southern Finland was inadequate and that timely and adequate protection measures, including new protected areas and restoration plans, were needed in all forest types to stop biodiversity loss.

However, in 2002 Finland decided on an action plan, the so-called METSO programme, which postponed the urgently needed decision on the need for a protection programme until 2007. The METSO programme included a small number of experimental, small-scale regional conservation projects and compensation for voluntary protection measures by land owners for the years 2003-15. In February 2008 the Finnish State Council decided to continue the METSO programme, instead of deciding on

a comprehensive protection programme. The funds allocated for the METSO programme are clearly insufficient. The amount of protected forest will increase only by about 0.3 per cent with the agreed funding. Thus, not more than about 1.8 per cent of southern Finland's forests will be protected even after this programme is implemented. This amount will certainly not reverse the trend of biodiversity loss in southern Finnish forests, especially since Finland also decided to further increase the volumes logged in the country by 10-15 per cent.

In their recent comments on METSO-programme, many regional environmental centres, universities and other research institutions expressed concerns for inadequacy of protection targets and insufficient representation of state-owned forests in protection plans.¹³ Finnish government's own forestry enterprise Metsähallitus is systematically logging in forests of high conservation value in southern Finland. The most recent examples include clear cutting and logging planning in habitats of regionally threatened Siberian jay and Three-toed woodpecker in the Pirkanmaa region.¹⁴



Clear cut by governmental Metsahallitus in one of the very last habitats of threatened Siberian jay in Virrat, Southern Finland. December 2007. Photo (c) Greenpeace/ Liimatainen.

2.4 Perverse subsidies

Finnish forest policy has been based on a centralized forest management model. Forest owners are obliged by law to pay membership fees to forest management associations that promote the clear cut forestry model and have a monopoly on forest management planning. The model also includes significant government subsidies to profitable private business – logging. In 2008, 57 million EUR are paid to private forest owners as subsidies for forest management operations, many of which are harmful to biodiversity.

2.5 Forestry threatens the rights of indigenous people

In Finland, the legally defined homeland of the Saami – EU's only indigenous people, is situated in the northernmost part. The northern forests have been used by the Saami for hundreds of years to provide pasture and fodder for reindeer. This traditional way of land use, which is also a basis for the Saami culture, is threatened by other land use practices.¹⁵ Almost all of the forest in the Finnish Saami Homeland is owned by the state. Logging by the state forest enterprise Metsähallitus has reduced the forest area available for reindeer herding. Lichen growing on old trees - an essential winter fodder for reindeer - has degraded as old-growth forests have diminished. Fragmentation of the forests and landscapes have also made reindeer herding more difficult. For years conflicts arose between reindeer herders and Metsähallitus over government logging operations. The government has allowed logging to continue despite United Nations Human Rights Committee's requests that Finland refrain from any activities that affect Saami rights as long as the land rights situation in the Saami Homeland is unclear.

2.6 Finland Case studies

2.6.1 Turjalaiset-Ahmatunturi

In Turjalaiset-Ahmatunturi in Savukoski municipality in Eastern Lapland, Metsähallitus logged in February-March 2008 in intact old-growth forests. The area hosts hundreds of red-listed species. The forests are several hundreds of years old, with all characteristics of old-growth forests clearly visible.



The intact old-growth forest in Turjalaiset-Ahmatunturi, Savukoski. Photo (c) Greenpeace/Liimatainen.

2.6.2 Pokka-Pulju

Over 500 occurrences of red-listed species have been found in the forests of Pokka-Pulju, Kittilä. The 130 km² area is second largest forest in need of protection as identified in the report "Unprotected Wilderness Forests in Forest Lapland", produced by Finnish NGOs.

In October 2007, Greenpeace discovered the existence of a logging plan for Pokka-Pulju for the coming winter season.

Greenpeace immediately commissioned a field survey in the planned logging sites. 30 occurrences of 8 different red-listed species (bracket fungi and lichens) were found on the logging sites during a one-day field survey. The old growth forest was in natural state without any signs of previous industrial logging. The field survey and a complete list of the threatened species with GPS-coordinates were sent to Metsähallitus on November 2007 by the experts who conducted the survey. Metsähallitus ignored the information, logged in the area in January-February 2008 and claim in its website that "No threatened species of bracket fungi have been discovered in the area".

2.6.3 Iso-Valkeainen/ Isokangas

In Iso-Valkeainen/Isokangas close to Murhijärvi in Suomussalmi, Metsähallitus carried out large clear cuts in old-growth forests in January and February 2008. Trees up to 400 years old were observed in the log piles. In 1994, Metsähallitus itself described the area as being old pine forest in natural state in an old-growth forest mapping report. Metsähallitus' own report recommended protection of the area because of ecological and scenic values. Now the area has been clear cut. In the same area Metsähallitus destroyed an ancient pathway that was protected by The Antiquities Act. According to experts from The Regional Museum of Kainuu and The National Board of Antiquities, this pathway was protected by law and should not have been logged. Police is investigating the matter.

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3. Conclusions and recommendations

Finland and Sweden have, as members of the EU and CBD signatories, committed to ambitious goals to halt the loss of biodiversity. The countries have also presented themselves in international fora as models for sustainable forestry.

However, the actions of the countries show that the political will to take concrete steps to reduce the loss of biodiversity is missing. Clear cutting of old-growth forests, habitats of threatened species and other forests with high conservation values goes on unabated in Nordic forests.

As long as wealthy nations like Finland and Sweden continue to log in their few remaining intact forest landscapes, it is unrealistic to expect that developing nations with most of the planet's remaining intact forest will protect large shares of their forest.

Greenpeace urges the Finnish and the Swedish governments to:

- Increase the funding for formal forest protection. All remaining intact forest landscapes and other high conservation value forests must be protected.
- Increase the formal protection measures rather than relying on voluntary protection measures.
- Abandon subsidies for forest management operations that are directly harmful to biodiversity. Subsidies for biodiversity preservation must be increased.

- Develop mechanisms to prevent harmful effects of the METSO programme in Finland. Inventories of high conservation value forests need to be carried out in southern Finland, since many of the valuable forests remain unknown.
- Not to implement the METSO programme in Sweden.
- Increase forest protection in southern Finland to attain favourable long-term protection status for forest habitats and species.
- Stop the logging of forests essential to the reindeer herding of indigenous Saami.
- Not to implement the proposal for increased forest productivity, via moving mountain forest boundary, increased fertilization, increased pre-commercial thinning and other measures that threaten biodiversity.



Photo: Hans Sundström