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SILVICULTURE: LANDSCAPE, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF FORESTS

In this paper, we discuss the emerging role of urban forestry at European and national level, placing emphasis to the cultural and social aspects of forest resources. In Italy, urban and peri-urban forests are generally considered important places for promoting social activities. In this context, foresters and urban foresters should act using the traditional forestry knowledge while encouraging the social and cultural aspects, including communication, information and involvement of users. This emerging approach needs to be supported by an organic collaboration with other disciplines and research methods.

Key words: urban forestry; urban planning; social functions; sustainability.

For the first time in the history of the Italian Forestry Conference, the Conference in Taormina (2008) included a session focused on the theme of forest landscapes and the social and cultural functions of forests. This changing of “horizons” has been driven by main factors including the rapid growth of urban population and the consequent urbanization of the rural and forest landscapes. In the last few decades, the growth of the urban population has reached a dramatic rate across Europe with the rate of 75% in 2005; by 2020 this rate will probably reach 80%, with peaks of 90% in seven European countries (EEA, 2006). In recent years, new approaches to urban and rural planning have been proposed, by considering an “organic” relationship between citizens and urban forest resources. The interest in the cultural and social aspects of the forest has become of primary importance as the provision of ecosystems functions and services. This new dimension of forestry is well described by the change of the forestry discipline at international level. In Europe, this new approach to forestry is becoming

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widely used and accepted (see: COST Action E 39 "Forests, trees and human health and wellbeing" www.e39.ee). In many European countries, there is a synergy between forest policies and those related to the sphere of social welfare and human health. This dimension of the forest will be the focus of the World Forestry Congress in October 2009 FAO and IUFRO World Forestry Congress in August 2010.

From a social perspective, urban and periurban forests can be seen as places of particular interest. In these places, foresters should act using the traditional forestry knowledge while encouraging the social and cultural aspects, including communication, information and involvement of users. Following this new approach there is a need to establish an organic collaboration with other disciplines and research methods. In land management, it is crucial to create a dialogue between science, technology and users. In particular, studies in urban forestry areas have shown that a constructive relationship with forest users could be possible through a participatory process. The forest and its management belong to everyone, not only to foresters: the social involvement, the access to the decision-making process and the participation of wide layers of society to the management, design and planning of forests are not minor things: participation, communication and social involvement have become a paradigm for the role of forestry in contemporary society.

As part of the discussion, it is also clear that urban forestry and management of forest landscapes represent two of the most exciting moments in the large and diverse debate on cultural and social aspects of forestry. Urban forestry, in its broadest sense, has shown its potential to play an important role in the context of emergencies, such as climate change, risk of desertification and rehabilitation of degraded sites.

Such issues will be one of the focuses of the next Expo 2015 in Milan. In this context, urban planners and foresters will attempt to see how urban and periurban forests could support the so called "green infrastructure" by providing various kinds of goods and services. Another key challenge for the future of forestry in Italy is the landscape governance and management. It does not seem a coincidence that the European Landscape Chart has been proposed and signed in Florence and the European awareness of the landscape has a strong "voice" in Italy, more than elsewhere in Europe, the landscape is the synthesis of cultural expression of millennia of history. Although there is a lack of positive experiences at national application, it is obvious that it is necessary to provide our country with new landscape management policies enhancing and protecting our forests and landscape culture, especially in suburban areas. A important role can be played by

universities that have the responsibility not only to pursue original lines of research, but also to facilitate the flow of information between the world of technical, policy makers and users.

CONCLUSIONS

In Italy and other Mediterranean countries forests and landscapes are different and change from southern to central and northern locations. There are also different environmental constraints especially climate conditions. In recent years, the multi-functionality of forests including cultural and social aspects assumed significant importance. Within the social aspects it is of primary importance to involve local populations in the various aspects of planning and managing these resources. Participation is the central paradigm of sustainability. Urban forest may play an important role in the context of emergencies, such as climate change and the risk of desertification.

Urban forestry can be important and essential to support planning strategies and policies.

REFERENCES

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