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OUTLOOK

No smoke without a fire

This spring a seminar about the retention approach in forestry was arranged in Stockholm. The world's leading experts were there and discussed retention forestry – freely translated as "leaving trees un-logged on clearcuts". Something which becomes increasingly common in Canada, USA, Europe and Australia.

At the end of the seminar, Christian Messier, professor in applied forest ecology at University of Montreal said: "when I started to study forests and forestry, Sweden was our role model. But today I tell my students that you are a deterrent".

An alert journalist wrote down his statement and it has since then been floating around in Swedish forest media. On top of that, a group of international researchers showed that Sweden is the second worst regarding retention of trees on clearcuts. Christian Messier was one of the experts of this group.

Now he clarifies his statement for SKOGEN: - During my forestry training Sweden was our role model - for us and for large parts of the forestry of the world. You consistently had logged your ancient forests, and you had normalized almost all stands to become monotypic and evenaged. Everything was pre-commercially thinned, thinned, and cleaned. The undergrowth and the dead wood had been removed.

Quebec and Sweden have about the same average site quality. Sweden then had an average yearly production of 5 m³ per ha. Quebec only had 1.5 m³ per ha, since there was such a large proportion unmanaged forest and ancient forest without net growth.

- But, this was in the 1980s; since then biodiversity has become a big issue, and now you are not at all a role model anymore. On the contrary, few countries have as effectively managed to remove everything that we want in the forests today, like complexity in tree species composition and age. Sure, you have changed your forestry quite a bit, partly as an adjustment to FSC. But, basically the goal is still the same. You still want to create almost monotypic, evenaged stands. And when it comes to tree retention you leave in principle only a few m³ per ha. But, to be really efficient for biodiversity you should leave at least 30-40 m³ per ha, all forest ecologists would agree on this.

- Your long Red List proves as good as anything that you are in trouble. You have more than 2,000 forest species on the Red List, right? Here in Quebec we have only one red-listed species that is threatened by forestry – the woodland caribou!

At the same time, he does not blame Sweden, he underlines. When today's forests were shaped it was the right thing to do. And we have a forest industry that is adapted to our forests and forestry. If we should leave larger volumes at logging the forest industry would suffer, which could harm the national economy. This is a dilemma, I fully realize this Christian Messier says.

- In Canada we are more fortunate, since we have not been as efficient. We still have vast areas of unlogged forests, in Quebec 20% of the forest is still unaffected by forestry. And the logged forests have been left to regenerate naturally. We have not cleaned them and hardly thinned them; thus they have a large variation in age and tree-species composition. Furthermore, all forestland is principally state-owned.

- This is why it has been easy for us to transform to the system which we believe much in here in Quebec, we call it the Triad. About 10% of the forest area is left totally unmanaged, on 10% – 20% we will have intensive forestry, and on the rest an ecosystem based forestry, particularly clearcut-free forestry where we extract 30%-50% of the volume at each logging occasion but also a careful clearcutting forestry where we retain large volumes, it can be up to 10% of the volume. With Triad we believe we will have a good balance between biodiversity and timber production, and at the same time a high acceptance from society.

I actually do feel a bit sorry for you, he ends. But the one that takes the lead often ends up as the last, if you change goal during your journey! Or, as is evidently claimed in an arabic old saying: when the caravan turns, the lame camel will become first in line!