

## Forests for recreation and nature tourism – European COST Action E33

With the decline in the importance of wood production in some European regions, and major structural changes to the agricultural economy, nature tourism is often looked upon as a means to achieve rural development. However, there have been few studies on the use of forests for recreational purposes across Europe. This research reviewed existing relevant work and conducted case studies of forest recreation enterprises across different European countries, including a case study of mountain biking in North Wales. The research showed that recreation and nature tourism can make important contributions to the rural economy. The success of such enterprises depends on social factors, such as attitudes and levels of cooperation amongst stakeholders, as well as natural features such as geo- and biodiversity.



### Background

Over the past few decades, social functions such as recreation have become an important objective of forest management in many European countries. It is only recently, however, that the recreational aspects of forests have been considered on a scientific level. This knowledge has often been fragmented and based upon studies outside Europe, most often in North America. There was therefore a need for a European research focus on forest management for recreation and nature tourism to identify similarities as well as regional and local differences. The research was funded as a COST (European Cooperation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research) Action, which is an intergovernmental network for cooperation in common research projects supported by national funds. COST Actions are launched by scientists themselves and focus on collating and analysing existing research information rather than conducting primary research. The aim of this Action was to improve the quality of information available to policy makers and forest managers on the recreation and tourism benefits of forestry, and to increase the effectiveness of techniques for delivering recreation and tourism benefits from forestry.

The Action explored three themes:

1. Economic and social values and benefits of recreation and nature tourism
2. Recreation and nature tourism supply and demand
3. Recreation planning and management

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### Methods

Forest Research participated in Working Group One of the Action, which explored the first theme and, in particular, the integration of forest recreation and tourism into the economy. The working group contained participants from a broad cross-section of European countries and employed the following methods:

1. Desk-based reviews of research and practice
2. Case studies of woodland recreation enterprises in countries across Europe using desk-based reviews as well as face-to-face, telephone and email questionnaire surveys
3. A UK case study of Coed Trallwm mountain biking in North Wales ([www.coedtrallwm.co.uk](http://www.coedtrallwm.co.uk)), which provided an example of a private woodland owner who had diversified into recreation and tourism provision

## Findings

The research found that within Europe there has been little explicit or comprehensive research on how to integrate forest recreation and tourism into economies. Instead, relevant information is often raised through wider research on forestry, woodland recreation and tourism, innovation, entrepreneurship and rural development.

The case studies highlighted how forest recreation and tourism can contribute to the rural economy by generating revenue and employment directly in forest-based enterprises. In addition, the sourcing of products and services with local providers or local tourism taxes paid by visitors can increase income. The extent to which benefits are embedded in local economies will depend on supply chains and tourism enterprises, and the extent to which they are able to generate additional spending.

Both existing research and the case studies emphasise the importance of natural factors (such as natural beauty, appealing geo- and biodiversity and suitable climate), as well as social dimensions (such as knowledge, skills and attitudes of individuals and co-ordination amongst actors) to successful enterprise development.

Tourism is impeded by the small and fragmented nature of many private forest holdings, owners' perceptions that legislation and regulations are overwhelming, and concerns surrounding access and public liability. Other constraints include lack of economic gain from recreational use of land, lack of organisational support and advice for the development of woodland recreation-based enterprises, competition between state and private provision, and increasing competition in the outdoor recreation market in general.

## Recommendations

The nature of a COST Action means that most of the recommendations are focused on identifying research priorities.

For research institutions, it is suggested that future European-wide work on integrating forest recreation and tourism into the economy should focus on:

- the level and integration of economic impacts in local and regional economies
- the level of and factors affecting the economic sustainability of forest recreation and tourism enterprises
- cost/benefit transfer mechanisms between land managers and tourism enterprises
- the willingness of visitors to pay for the use of recreation facilities and services
- the development of guidelines, tools and training for forest managers in recreation provision

There is also a need to review broader rural and economic development research and to assess its implications for the integration of woodland recreation and tourism into the economy.

### Partners

Representatives from 25 countries across Europe took part in this COST Action.

Key partners include:

Simon Bell, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, UK (Chair of the Action)

Murray Simpson, University of Oxford, UK (Chair of Working Group One)

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This was a European COST Action Project funded by the European Commission and participants' host institutions.

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### Reports and publications

Simpson, M., Pichler, V., Tyrvaïnen, L., Collins, K., Martin, S., Strange, N., Vuletic, D. (2008). *The Economic and Social Values of Forests for Recreation and Nature Tourism: a research overview*. COST Action E33: Forests for Recreation and Nature Tourism (FORREC). European Commission, COST and European Science Foundation. Available at <http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/coste33/workinggroup1.htm>

Other reports and publications can be found on the COST Action webpage: <http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/coste33/homepage.htm>

Findings from the COST Action were presented at a conference 'Forest Recreation and Tourism Serving Urbanised Societies in Finland' in May 2008. <http://www.metla.fi/tapahtumat/2008/recreation-tourism/>