
“Hannes Mäntyranta, Forest Certification - An ideal that became an absolute”

some comments

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Hannes Mäntyranta, *Forest Certification, An ideal that became an absolute*, Metsälehti Kustannus, 2002.

Finnish stories

In the novel “Elämä lyhyt, Rytkönen pitkä”² by Arto Paasilinna, Rytkönen, severely suffering from dementia, is travelling with taxidriver Sorjonen through Finland, when he meets his old friend Heikki Mäkitalo. Farmer Mäkitalo is completely fed up with Finnish society. He has worked his whole life for his land, but what has he got in return? Nothing. According to Mäkitalo, society does not have anything to give him and soon it will no longer be in a position to take anything. Therefore he plans the total destruction of his farmhouse and all the lands and forests that belong to it. It takes Mäkitalo and his old friend Rytkönen several days to destroy virtually everything. After this dramatic event, two experts, one of the land registry and one of the Finnish forestry association are commissioned by the government to look into the legal aspects of the case. After three days of serious research, the two-headed committee comes to the surprising conclusion that, after the destruction work, Mäkitalo’s farm, when considered from economic and forestry points of view, finds itself in an excellent condition. The experts conclude that optimal conditions for sustainable forest development were created. Economically, there is no further need for subsidies or other government expenses.

This wonderful and hilarious story came to my mind when I read Mäntyranta’s book on the Finnish and Nordic process of forestry certification. Hannes Mäntyranta, journalist and communications co-ordinator of the Finnish Forest Association (Suomen Metsäyhdistys) gives a surprisingly detailed account of the history of Finnish forestry certification. Main players are the forest owner organisations, the national forestry institutions, environmental organisations (notably WWF), business players (paper industry and paper clients) and the different certification initiatives (notably FSC, the Finnish system and PEFC). The book shows the realities of political processes: a mixture of strategies, tactics, misunderstanding, false interpretations, distortion of information and the use of lies. It shows in great detail how the environmentalists were fighting for ‘their’ FSC system and how forest owners in Finland and other European countries, more than once irritated by the tactics of the environmentalists, developed their own national systems and finally PEFC, the paneuropean forest certification. The reader becomes witness of countless meetings, many of which were badly prepared, did not result in anything positive, or even only contributed to more misunderstanding and lack of trust.

² Arto Paasilinna, *Der Sommer der lachenden Kühe*, Ehrenwirth 2001, translated from Finnish: *Elämä lyhyt, Rytkönen pitkä*, SOY, Helsinki 1991.

Irritation

Mäntyranta's book makes clear that representatives of Finnish forestry and agriculture must often have felt not unlike farmer Mäkitalo. They must have got Mäkitalo's feeling that society keeps asking more and more but does not give too much in return for the hard work they deliver. Apart from government bureaucracy and increasing demands by paper and other companies, the behaviour of internationally operating environmental organisations, such as WWF and Greenpeace, are a continuous source of irritation. After having managed family forests for hundreds or even thousands of years more or less sustainably, young intellectuals from Berlin, Amsterdam and London, without any practical background in forestry, come to Finland to tell the farmers what is right or wrong and they expect the farmers not only to change their working methods but also to engage in time-consuming bureaucratic systems of standard-setting, implementation and certification. Finnish irritation about interference with Finnish forestry by environmental outsiders was well expressed in a cartoon in the Helsingin Sanomat of November 22, 2002 after a visit of German publishers to the forests in Northern Finland. It showed a picture of the Rovaniemi fire brigade at Rovaniemi airport, looking at a German airplane coming in. The fireman gives the following message to his colleagues: "*Hälytys yksiköt B1 ja B2!! Lufthansa laskussa! Saksalaisia tulossa suojelemaan lapin metsiä*" ("Red alert, units B1 and B2!! Lufthansa landing!! Germans coming over to protect the forests of Lapland.")

Despite the richness of his historical data, Mäntyranta is telling a simple story. It is a systematic attempt at proving that the environmentalists were and are wrong at many points and that they used and still use bad tactics. Mäntyranta's book is a clear expression of what many, probably the majority, of forest people in Finland tend to think: "these environmentalists do not have the right to interfere with our Finnish business in the way they do."

Mäntyranta's argumentation appears to contain some valid points. The discussion between proponents of PEFC and FSC was and is in many ways not very rational. Below the surface of a technical discussion about certification there were deeper conflicts that prevented real communication. The role of the environmental organisations, notably WWF's role, was and is not always convincing. Not only did tactical interests often prevail over systematic strategies, there was also a lack of internal co-ordination between the international WWF organisation and its national subsidiaries. There appeared to be a lack of knowledge about the forestry sector in general. The environmentalists' arguments were not always very well founded and sometimes very weak. This is true for studies such as "Anything Goes" and "PEFC - an analysis, for example". It is also true for many of the arguments brought forward in all sorts of tactical discussions.

It is not the whole story

However, Mäntyranta's book appears to be incomplete. In the first place, the reader does not get an idea of what could have been done differently or better on the side of the Finnish forest organisations. The book is focussing so strongly on

the mistakes made by the environmentalists that, despite the richness of the historical data used, a black-and-white picture is the result: the good forest guys and the bad environmental guys. This is not satisfactory. It would have been more interesting to ask what the Finnish forestry people should have done differently in order to improve their discussion with the environmentalists. You need not be a communications expert to understand that the quality of communication is always dependent on the communication skills and methods of both parties in a conflict situation.

In the second place, the book unfortunately does not contain any clue for a solution of the communication problems between Finnish forestry and its stakeholders. Blaming the environmentalists may be psychologically rewarding for Finnish forestry people. It does not solve the problem. On the contrary. It will not make the environmental organisations more willing to engage in open stakeholder dialogue. It will not change the trust the public has in them. It will not diminish their power vis-à-vis the general public and consumers. It will not change the attitude of powerful economic players, such as publishing houses or paper companies who have to take the environmental organisations seriously.

The nature of the debate

The next step in the Finnish and European discussion about forest certification should no longer primarily focus on the question of who is right or who is wrong. The next step will be a tough negotiation between representatives of the different systems, notably PEFC and FSC. Before that, both sides should have a realistic view of the nature of the problems to be tackled. As long as it is assumed that the discussion between PEFC and FSC is merely a technical discussion about forestry standards, certification systems and costs only, there is not much hope for constructive debate and clear solutions. Both sides have to acknowledge that the primary discussion before any technical discussion is about issues such as independence, autonomy, (national) pride and professional knowledge. Both sides of the discussion should keep in mind that certification in itself is not a goal, but a means to an end.

For the environmental side of the debate, the central goal is the preservation of forests and biodiversity in forests. Forest certification systems can play a modest role in realising that goal. This role is only modest, since the most important threats to forests do not come from forestry but from forest destruction as a result of agriculture (e.g. palm oil plantations in Indonesia), mining (e.g. nickel/platinum mining in Russia) and other industrial activities.

Unfortunately, for some people in environmental organisations, FSC certification has become almost a goal in itself. This is understandable because of their strong commitment to the development of FSC, in setting up the principles, the governance structure and the forestry and trade network. One was sometimes left with the impression that PEFC's attacks at FSC created so much work and required so much energy that three important questions were not asked

systematically: (1) what is FSC's maximum or likely contribution to realising WWF's forest and biodiversity goals?, (2) what is the expected difference between FSC and PEFC in reaching these goals?, (3) what is the cost-effectiveness of resources spent on the FSC-PEFC controversy as compared to putting these resources into other forestry and biodiversity related work? This is equally true for Finnish forestry's resistance against FSC and against the associated environmental organisations. Attacking international market leader FSC absorbed so much energy of their people that a rational discussion of the different approaches to forestry certification did not take place, as Mäntyranta's book so beautifully describes.

Who are the good guys?

So, who are the good guys and who are the bad guys in the Finnish forestry debate? Finnish foresters try to tell us that the environmentalists cannot be trusted. Greenpeace and WWF try to tell us that under PEFC "anything goes" and finally German publishers try to sell us the story that "the Finnish disease is the lack of a dialogue culture". The Fins, however, point at the fact that "German publishers care more about their own image than about the real condition of Finnish forestry" (FAZ 28.12.2002). We might conclude then, that there are bad guys only. My conclusion from my own experience and from the facts in Mäntyranta's book is completely different. In reality, all parties have been performing beyond reasonable expectations. In an unbelievably short period of time, European (including Finnish) forestry organisations have done a tremendous job in presenting an alternative to FSC. On their side, FSC has managed to effectively fight back when their brand was attacked by PEFC. This was done on the basis of an extremely low budget with only very limited human resources. FSC has done better than many commercial companies would have done in a comparable situation. German publishers have dealt very professionally with the Finnish conflicts and thereby they have contributed to their positive image of responsible citizenship.

All parties have done the best to their abilities. Still, the overall result is not good enough. There are still opportunities for a better Finnish stakeholder dialogue on forestry issues. All parties can profit and all parties can start improving the dialogue. No one has to wait for the others. The recipe is simple: do everything you can to make the others become better players. It is more fun to play against a good team. And it leads to better outcomes.

This will be the subject of my next essay.

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Dr. Reinier de Man (1948) studied chemistry and wrote his PhD in political science. In the beginning of his career, he worked as an associate professor in strategic management, before he started his own environmental policy and strategy consultancy.



The focus of his work is on organising international partnerships for sustainability and policy discussions between various stakeholders: private companies, associations, government institutions and NGOs. His main clients are large corporations, international NGOs and government. The majority of his work is in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland,

Norway and Finland.

As a consultant, he helped Otto Versand, Norske Skog and Axel Springer Verlag set up the so-called OPTI-project: optimisation of the paper chain and is involved in Axel Springer's Finnish projects. The Norwegian and Finnish projects received one of the ICC/UNEP World Summit Business Awards for Sustainable Development Partnerships in Johannesburg. He is advising NGOs how to set up their business partnerships in the forestry and paper sector and he is active in setting up a round table between business and NGOs for sustainable palm oil.

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KARLSSON HELSINGIN SANOMAT 22.11.2002



Rovaniemi fire brigade: "Red alert, units B1 and B2!! Lufthansa landing! Germans coming over to protect the forests of Lapland."

Rovaniemi Feuerwehr: "Achtung Einheiten B1 und B2!! Lufthansa landet! Die Deutschen kommen um die Wälder Laplands zu schützen."