

Ando Eelmaa: Private owners ensure sustainability of forest management

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Ando Eelmaa.

The recent "Mets" (Forest) yearbook suggests that there are some 100,000 private forest owners in Estonia, which is also how many different views we have in terms of how forests should be managed. A diverse approach in terms of how to care for and manage private forests can ensure their versatility, sustainability and biodiversity, Ando Eelmaa writes.

A wide circle of forest owners is the foundation of having versatile and biodiverse forests. Every owner has the right to make their own decisions. Member organizations of the Estonian Private Forest Union represent owners who are very active at managing their forests, as well as those who have left things completely up to nature. Every private forest reflects its owner's character – true biological diversity.

In addition to people's ideological principles, the timber market situation is another factor affecting forest decisions. The Environment Agency's felling volumes data was a good reflection of the market in recent years – prices were soaring in 2018 that motivated a lot of private owners to cut, resulting in record-breaking volumes.

Prices mostly fell in 2019, which fact is once again reflected in felling volumes. The Estonian Private Forest Union estimates that private owners have also been less prone to cutting in 2020 due to continued low prices and unfavorable weather conditions. However, private forest owners must still take action this year to avoid considerable bark beetle damage.

Statistical analysis of forest inventory suggests that a quarter of our economic forests are ripe, while the percentage is higher still for private forests. Unfortunately, ripe forests are also more sensitive to damage.

Older forest stands are more often weakened by rot and, therefore, more susceptible to other types of damage, such as from storms or the bark beetle. Owners of ripe economic forests should consider renewing them as the value of over-ripe timber starts to fall and is largely good only for energy production. A recommendation for the future in light of climate change is to favor mixed forest that is more resilient to various threats.

What troubles me the most about recent forest statistics is the falling number of physical person forest owners. People live in cities and have lost their personal connection to forests owned by their families. As the agency's report mentions, people are more open to selling.

We hope that a recently passed tax break but also time spent in the woods during the emergency situation will motivate new owners to abandon thoughts of selling and to manage forests themselves, also thinking about future generations. The more owners who care for their forests we have, the greater the versatility of Estonian forests.

In spite of the crisis and emergency situation, millions of trees will be planted in our privately owned forests this spring. We would do well to recall the words of Martin Luther – even if I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree. But why not a spruce, pine or oak? It is up to every forest owner to decide what kind of a forest they want to leave their children.

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