

## Arguments for More Social Science in Forestry

By Ulrike Pröbstl, Coordinator of IUFRO Research Group [6.01.00](#) – Forest recreation, landscape and nature conservation

The theme of the 15th International Symposium on Society and Resource Management (ISSRM) held in Vienna, Austria, in July 2009 was “**Meet Old and New Worlds in Research Planning and Management**”. The conference, which was organized by the BOKU University, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research and supported by IUFRO, provided a unique opportunity to have a look at these old and new worlds with a focus on the social sciences and resource management. It aimed at enhancing the discussion of methodological traditions in contrast to pragmatic solutions and the exploration of cultural and political influences on planning and decision making processes in all parts of the world. Here are a few of the forest-related issues that were discussed by the almost 500 delegates from 44 countries:

### Supporting the poor

In the context of community forestry the economic contribution of forestry to the poor was critically discussed. Case studies and experiences from Nepal, Kenya and the Ukraine underlined the importance of this issue worldwide.

### Collaborative planning

Since collaborative planning in forestry is a growing field with new methodological challenges, there was a strong focus on public involvement and public discourse in forest policy. Within this broad field the experiences and the social environmental relations of aboriginal communities were studied in particular.

### Understanding private forest owners

Several sessions focused on the preferences, values and behaviour of private forest owners. Contributions from Sweden, Canada, Italy, Brazil and the US illustrated the necessity to learn more about the typical trade-offs between utilitarian, emotional, and socio-cultural aspects that are made. A study from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, for example, showed that private forest owners perceive little economic risk concerning the possible effects of climate change on their forests. The willingness to discuss or to change their management is therefore very low.

### Complexity of decision making in developing countries

Local traditions often have a strong influence on the local decision making process. Several case studies from the Amazon area, Africa and Asia also illustrated the complex multiplicity of actors and interests, the lack of structural

coordination as well as a disparity in empowerment. In case of Ethiopia's afro-montane rainforests where international donor agencies and coffee companies have clear rights and a mandate to pursue their aims, local resource users and Ethiopian civil society organizations, who may care most for the forests, have little say. It has been estimated that, given deforestation rates, the country will lose its last high forest tree in the world's only original wild population of *Coffea Arabica* within about 25 years.

### Cross-cultural cooperation

Solutions of conflicts were presented in a session on cross-cultural cooperation in forests and protected areas. Participatory planning processes and cross-sectoral collaborations for resource management enhanced the biodiversity conservation in the case studies from Sweden, New-Zealand, Canada Kenya and many others.

### Implementing sustainable forest management

Within the various presentations on sustainable forest management it was interesting to learn more about the

implementation during times of political transformation, e.g. in Bulgaria, Belarus and Russia.

### The role of social science in forestry

Many other papers discussed the role of social science in forestry, reviewing methods, comparing theory and the practise of collaboration in forest management or discussing the setting of social standards in forest certification and sustainable forest management. Overall, the symposium documented clearly the increasing relevance of social science in forestry. We hope that the joint symposium will enhance the awareness of these issues in IUFRO and their consideration in the future.

The abstracts are still available at the website:

<http://www.issrm09.info>



*Photo: Professor Ulrike Pröbstl of BOKU University, Vienna, at the reception for the conference participants in the Vienna City Hall*

*Courtesy of: Institut für Landschaftsentwicklung, Erholungs- und Naturschutzplanung*