

5. The economic value of a good forestry strategy

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At the start of the winter when all the leaves have fallen, municipal councils everywhere chop down trees. Because they only have a limited amount of work on offer, they contract it to local tree surgeons who often shred the trunk immediately after chopping. The tree removal is therefore a cost item. Which is a shame, since if they had called in a professional forester, the councils could have made money from it.

In Dutch politics, discussing forests and trees almost always means discussing the ecology of woodland management (nature preservation and environment protection) or leisure. The economy of woodland management is hardly mentioned. Which is strange, since the overall Dutch forestry and wood sector employs 69,000 people. The Dutch wood processing industry processes around € 1 billion worth of wood, and every person in the Netherlands uses almost 1 m³ of wood a year. 90% of this wood comes from abroad. Our company also imports a lot of wood; only a very small percentage comes from Dutch woodlands.

It would be good if the government were to recognise the economic value of our woodlands. That used to be the case, but sadly the latest forestry strategy plan dates from 1993, whilst regular updates really are essential. The provincial councils have also failed to include forests and wood in their coalition plans. It apparently has little priority.

Now you might be thinking: how about the fantastic Hoge Veluwe? But the Hoge Veluwe National Park is privately owned.

People often don't know that the Netherlands has not had any ancient forests since 1871. All the forests have been created and maintained by humans. We often forget that ecological and economic forestry management can work hand-in-hand. Both have the same long-term goal: an attractive, diverse and well-maintained forest.

But such a forest does not arise of its own accord. One has to look at the development of the trees and the forest as a whole. Without a long-term plan for regular thinning and regeneration we will be lacking the tree species in the future for subsequent generations to use.

If we think of felling trees, we often think of large empty expanses with tree stumps. These are the images of tropical rainforests where the local population sometimes chops down forests to provide the essentials of life. The fact that this is a social problem is beyond doubt. European forests are managed very differently. Here, a third of the land area is covered with forests, and only 55% of the additional growth is chopped. 90% of European forests are available for leisure activities.

Economic forestry management goes beyond merely ensuring that the trees that are felled are not shredded immediately. It also includes planning new planting. This allows optimal use of the production potential of the site.

There are organisations which are keen to help municipal and provincial councils in bringing about sustainable forestry management and sustainable forestry chains. One example is the not-for-profit Probos Foundation in Wageningen, which does this with a strong practical approach. Provincial and municipal councils really should make use of this in developing their woodlands, so that economic and ecological forest management come together.

The good thing is: it also generates earnings!

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