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## THE ATTITUDE OF THE FLEMISH PRIVATE FOREST OWNER TOWARDS MULTIPLE USE FORESTRY AND THE NEW FOREST DECREE.

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### ABSTRACT

The importance of private forest in the multiple use forestry in Flanders should not be underestimated. Generally speaking, the attitude of the private forest owner is far from negative. Practice has shown some positive achievements. The private forest owner is not only interested in wood production and investment, but he also takes a very keen interest in hunting, nature conservation and recreation. Forest legislation is a good means to increase the significance of multiple use forestry in private forests. In this respect, the recent Flemish Forest Decree makes a considerable contribution, on the one hand by imposing some obligations, such as a management plan, and on the other hand by promoting wood production as well as forest conservation, recreation and nature development in the forest.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the recently regionalized Belgium a Forest Decree for the Flemish Region was made in 1990. Two major features of this Decree are :

- it also applies to the private forest;
- it stresses the importance of multiple use forestry.

Private forests cover about 70% of the forest area in Flanders. In the past they were not submitted to the Forest Law. Consequently, on the one hand management as well as accessibility were free, but on the other hand there were no incentives either. Other features are the considerable parcelization, the artificial and homogeneous character of the forests and their young age. This means that the existing situation was a rather unfavorable starting point for a multiple use forestry.

Very little is known about the private forest in Flanders. Therefore an investigation was carried out, by means of an inquiry, in order to have more insight in the attitude of the private forest owners with respect to the Forest Decree, and in its striving for multiple use forestry.

A total number of 189 questionnaires were sent to the private forest owners. Out of these, 64 (or 35 % ) were appropriate to be processed. They represented fairly well all

forest size- classes (table 1).

Table 1. Repartition of the surveyed owners into size classes

Size class	1	2	3	4	tot.
Size of forest	<1	1-2	5-50	>50	
n. of owners	9	19	23	13	64
%	14	30	36	20	100

The inquiry does not completely correspond to the real situation of the private forest. Nevertheless, the owners represent 2,5 % of the private forest area. The reliability of the answers, however, remains an open question.

## 2. GENERAL OBJECTIVES OF THE PRIVATE FOREST OWNER

Generally speaking, multiple use forestry is found to be a natural feature of the private forest. Indeed, on average the forest owners indicate two main objectives for their forest possession (tab.2)

Table 2 : Objectives of the private forest owners (number and %).

Size-class	1	%	2	%	3	%	4	%	tot	%
Wood production	5	56	7	37	14	61	10	77	36	56
Investment	4	44	7	37	9	39	4	31	24	38
Nature conservation	1	11	7	37	10	43	5	38	23	36
Hunting	0	0	1	5	5	22	12	92	18	28
Recreation	2	22	6	32	7	30	1	8	16	25
Soil protection	1	11	0	0	1	4	1	8	3	5
Others	2	22	4	21	1	4	1	8	8	13

It is quite obvious that financial motives are dominating with the private forest owners : wood production and/or investment are mentioned in 75% of the cases :

- Wood production is mainly important with the large forest owners (77%).
- Investment is a major objective for 38% of the owners, especially for the small forest owners.

Despite the strong preference for financial goals, there is still an important number of forest owners who are not at all interested neither in wood production or in investment. It is remarkable too that 36% of the forest-owners consciously strive for nature conservation. It is not clear, however, what exactly they understand by this term. In any case, experience has shown that they do not consider it in the same way as the "real" conservationists.

It is also surprising, that only 28% of the owners mention hunting as a major objective. Hunting is not important for the large group of small forest owners. With the owners of large forests, on the contrary, it is of major importance (92%). This means that hunting is very important in a large area of forest in Flanders.

Recreational purposes, either by the owner or by third persons, are not significant (25%). It is most important to the middle sized owners, whereas it is practically of no significance for the larger owners. Other specific goals, such as soil protection or hobby, are just mentioned a couple of times.

The results prove that the objectives of the large forest owner differ largely from the ones of the small forest owner :

- the large forest owner is strongly interested in hunting and wood production, he has a moderate interest in investment and nature conservation, whereas recreation and other objectives do not have much significance;
- the small forest owner does not have a clear dominating objective : wood production is, however, his main interest, followed by investment; nature conservation and recreation are not unimportant, contrary to hunting and other different specific objectives.

### **3. ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF THE PRIVATE FOREST IN FLANDERS.**

The private forest owners can be classified in three separate groups:

- personal possession : 62%
- family possession : 20%

- company possession : 18%

Family possession mainly occurs with large forest owners. It originates from inheritance (60%). Generally speaking the latter category accounts for 40% of forest possession. It is mainly important with the large forest ownerships (85%). Most of the owners acquire forest by purchase, not by inheritance.

The important number of forest purchases shows the interest for the forest, whatever might be the objective.

On average, an owner keeps a private forest in Flanders during 27 years. Especially family possession lasts longer, whereas personal possession mostly lasts less than 20 years. More than 60% of the forest owners are opposed to selling their forest. However, 16% of them favor it strongly. In most cases, they belong to the smallest forest owners, but they do appear in all size classes.

On average, the financial result of the Flemish private forest is considered to be negative. Although very few owners have accurate accounting, nearly half of them experience their forest results as financially negative. The main causes are : low yields (34%) and high expenses (16%). Taxes are only considered as secondary elements: property tax 11% and succession taxes 8%. The confrontation of the forest business result with the forest objectives mainly indicates that :

- each goal can lead to a different financial result;
- especially hunting has a positive financial result;
- recreation is mostly experienced as financially negative.

Only 14% of the owners declare that they are financially dependent from their forest, on average for 44%. In this respect it is remarkable, however, that the income from fellings is not so important, contrary to the income from recreation.

Before the Forest Decree the private forest owners did not qualify for subsidies. At present, the Forest Decree provides for considerable incentives. Even though only 56% of the owners evaluate subsidizing as a positive measure. On the contrary, up to 17% declare that they oppose the idea of subsidies on principle. They are particularly opposed to the restrictive conditions linked with the incentives. It is remarkable that 70% of the owners are not informed about the subsidy regulations. This means that forest administration should provide them with useful information.

#### **4. RECREATION, HUNTING AND NATURE CONSERVATION IN THE PRIVATE FOREST.**

It is obvious that private forests are also important from a point of view of recreation, hunting and nature conservation. According to the old Forest Law as well as to the new Forest Decree, private forests in Flanders are on principle not accessible to the

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public. Nevertheless 25% of the owners declare that recreation is an important goal and up to 31% declare that their forests are accessible. (There is a certain contradiction between these two declarations). Especially the small forest owners are in favor of accessibility, contrary to the larger ones.

The large owners are, as already indicated, mainly directed towards hunting. Therefore they are for the greater part against accessibility, as it is difficult to link these two objectives, and the more so as they practice hunting in more than 95% of the forest area. Nevertheless, according to the declarations, still 30% of the private forests, in which hunting is possible, are accessible.

Despite the voluntary opening up of their forests, a lot of private forest owners evaluate this forest function or task as negative. Only 35% are in favor, whereas 20% are opposed to it. In any case, a compulsory opening of the forest is evaluated as very negative. All groups of forest owners are against it. Accessibility, linked with incentives, is slightly better appreciated :

- positive to subsidized accessibility : 23 %
- neutral to subsidized accessibility : 21 %
- negative to subsidized accessibility : 56 %

From these figures, one may conclude that a spontaneous opening of the private forests in Flanders will, despite subsidies, not be realized in the next few years. The owners are especially afraid of losing part of their privacy, and of hunting and forest damage.

Contrary to this tendency, it is remarkable that most of the private forest owners strongly support nature conservation : 52 % are in favor; 25 % are against, mainly large owners. It probably means that they are themselves aware of the very poor natural character of most of their forests. The more negative attitude of the large forest owners is caused by two facts :

1. The importance attached to positive enterprise results and the fear that more natural forests will lead to a decrease in yields.
2. The importance attached to hunting and the continuous battle with conservationists with regard to hunting.

## **5. THE MANAGEMENT OF THE PRIVATE FOREST.**

Up to now, the management in the private forest has been, with the exception of some local measures, completely free. The Forest Decree determines, however, that for each unbroken forest, with an area of at least 5 ha, a management plan must be made.

Generally speaking, the private forest in Flanders is relatively poorly managed. Just a few private forest owners make an inventory (19%) and even less make a management plan (8 %) - with the exception of some large owners. Fellings in private forests are limited. According to the inquiry results it is just done in half of the properties. In these forests on average 2.9 m<sup>3</sup> are cut yearly. The average annual removal in the whole private forest just reaches 1.4 m<sup>3</sup>. Not even every forest owner, who strives for wood production, does cuttings regularly. On the other hand, almost half of the forest owners are interested in an additional free silvicultural training. Despite the general lack of management, more than 40 % of the owners are in favor of making an inventory (43%). On the contrary, still 25% are strongly opposed. The attitude against the management plan is a result of the imposed constraints :

- in principle the management plan is appraised relatively positively : 40% are in favor and 20% are opposed; especially the large owners' positive approach is remarkable;
- 2/3 of the owners are against an obligatory management plan and only 3% are in favor of it; mainly the large owners, who are in principle in favor, are against this particular obligation;
- almost 3/4 of the owners are opposed to an obligatory management plan that, moreover, must be approved; again, the opposition comes mainly from the large forest owners.

The latter conclusion is very important, as this particular regulation was taken up in the Forest Decree. It means that the introduction of an obligatory management plan will meet with some resistance and that, at the same time, it should not be done one-sidedly. Therefore, the forest administration, aware of the critical situation, has coupled both the inventory and the management plan with subsidies for plantations and maintenance. Incentives, however, do not solve all problems. Indeed still 35% of the private forest owners declare that they are against the management restrictions, even when these are linked with subsidies. The Forest Decree also tries to improve the private forest by promoting forestry associations. This too will not be so simple, though some facts have to be considered as being quite positive. Firstly, 20% of the forest are already in family possession. Even though only 12% of the owners declare that a certain form of collaboration exists at the moment. Furthermore, a number of owners show a certain positive attitude towards collaboration:

- 30 % are in favor of a collaboration with private-forest owners; at the same time, however, 30 % are opposed to the idea;
- 22 % are in favor of a collaboration with the forest administration; 44 % are against;

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- 38 % are in favor of a collaboration with the forest administration, provided it is coupled with subsidies.

The latter attitude is encouraging. In a first phase, the formation of forestry associations is expected to be successful, provided it is well accompanied. Even more, a limited number of owners (10%) are willing to hand over the management of their forests to the forest administration.

## 6. CONCLUSION.

In the past the contribution of private forests to the multiple use forestry in Flanders was not appreciated very highly. However, it should not be underestimated. The attitude of the private forest owner is certainly not so negative. The practice too shows many positive achievements. The private forest owner is not only interested in wood production and investment, but he also takes a keen interest in hunting, nature development and recreation. Only a limited number of forest owners are opposed to forest conservation. Forest legislation is a good means to increase the importance of multiple use forestry in private forests. The Flemish Forest Decree tries to contribute to this :

- it promotes the general management of the private forests by means of the obligatory management plan, the subsidies for plantations and maintenance and the formation of forestry associations;
- a well managed forest must lead to financially and economically better results;
- the natural value of the forests is promoted by subsidies for the plantation of indigenous tree species and by the creation of forest reserves;
- the social function of the forest is also promoted by subsidies.