

A wide range of measures needed to protect forest biodiversity

Opinions on the effectiveness of the METSO Forest Biodiversity Programme surveyed

Stakeholders and researchers believe that a wide range of ecologically effective and cost-efficient measures are needed to ensure that the biodiversity of Southern Finland's forests are adequately conserved. Respondents see a need to define conservation objectives, but setting a specific target in terms of percentages or hectares meets also criticism. The voluntary measures within the METSO Forest Biodiversity Programme for Southern Finland, including natural values trading, competitive tendering and forest biodiversity co-operation networks, are generally perceived as having increased the social acceptability of forest conservation, which is vital for its success. METSO contains 17 measures to be carried out during the period 2003–2007 and is jointly led by the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. The Finnish Forest Research Institute (Metla) and the Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE) conduct monitoring and evaluation of the METSO Programme over 2003-2006.

The Second Interim Monitoring and Evaluation Report on the METSO Programme compiles the views of researchers and the representatives of various stakeholders²⁾ on the applicability and impact of the METSO Programme measures, and how they should be applied from 2006 onwards. These opinions and visions were surveyed during 2005 through meetings, interviews and questionnaires. The perceptions compiled in the interim report will also form part of a more extensive report on the ecological, economic and social impacts of the METSO Programme, due to be published towards the end of 2006.

Many respondents stress that social and economic factors should be considered during the selection of sites for protection, in addition to ecological grounds. Such factors include the effects of protection on the whole forest sector, as well as impacts on regional and local employment and the economic viability of rural areas.

Larger conservation areas were seen as being more ecologically effective than smaller areas, although the importance of certain smaller sites such as herb-rich woodlands and traditional agricultural biotopes for their biodiversity is also recognised. The proximity of other existing protected areas is also thought to be a positive factor to be given more consideration in the designation of new areas.

The temporary nature of the protection involved in some of the voluntary conservation measures in the METSO Programme, such as fixed-term contracts of 10 years in natural values trading schemes, attracted criticism as being ecologically uncertain. On the other hand, the advantages of this form of conservation for certain types of sites were also highlighted.

The further improvement of nature management in commercial forests in terms of favouring ecologically valuable features was seen by both researchers and other stakeholders to have a lot of importance to safeguard biodiversity, due to the large areas of commercially managed forest in Southern Finland.

The purposeful enhancement of nature values in protected areas through forest habitat restoration was also seen as useful in certain types of sites, although respondents also point out that the setting of objectives and the monitoring of impacts for habitat restoration schemes should be improved.

Both researchers and stakeholders believe that future monitoring of the METSO Programme should also examine the types of sites protected through the programme measures, and assess how these sites differ from areas protected previously. Respondents would like to know more about the effects of temporary protection or habitat restoration, as well as the cost-efficiency of various measures with regard to safeguarding nature values.

1) Survey respondents included representatives of stakeholders such as forest industry organisations, nature conservationists, forest owners, recreational users of forests, businesses and administrators in the forest sector, local authorities, and tourism organisations.