

Theme's in European forest history

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During the past decade there has been a growing interest in forest history in Europe. The call for a better understanding of European forest ecosystems and how they developed over time became stronger after the infamous waldsterben in Germany and other parts of Europe, that was believed to have been caused by acid precipitation. Since the mid-1980s an extraordinary range of research is carried on into woodland history by all kinds of people ranging from practising ecologists, foresters and conservationists to academic archaeologists, historians and palynologists. The first group is driven by the professional need to know how semi-natural woodland systems worked in the past, in order to manage the remnants and create healthier forests. The second group is partly inspired by the wish to help the first, and partly by the need to understand the forest ecosystems as the context for human settlement and exploitation of forest resources in the past.

In general there are five themes that dominate European woodland history. The first theme is the extent and nature of the natural forests before human intervention. This connects neatly with the second theme that deals with the question when and how the forests were exploited and (partly) destroyed through human activity. A third theme explores the mythology surrounding the ancient forests of Europe, which still is tremendous influential in the European consciousness. This has serious consequences for the way forests are managed and protected and also the kind of forests that can be planted (i.e. desirable) at present. The fourth theme that can be identified is the study of semi-natural woodlands and how these were managed during the past 400 years. The fifth and final research interest is related to the introduction of alien tree species and whether or not they have a place in European forestry.

The paper will explore these five themes and will highlight where European forest history stands at the moment and how the results can be used for the future management of forests.

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