



# Fostering a flexible forest: Challenges and strategies in the advisory practice of a deregulated forest management system



Rolf Lidskog\*, Erik Löfmarck

Environmental Sociology Section, Örebro University, SE-701 82 Örebro, Sweden

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 22 June 2015

Received in revised form 23 October 2015

Accepted 28 October 2015

Available online 5 November 2015

### Keywords:

Forest governance

Forest professionals

Norm distribution

Knowledge dissemination

Climate change

Swedish forest policy

## ABSTRACT

In deregulated forest management systems, social norms, knowledge dissemination and communication are pivotal for guiding forest owners' actions. This presents a challenge to national forest agencies charged with the task of translating forest policy into practice. Drawing on interviews with forest consultants employed by the Swedish Forest Agency, this paper discusses the challenges present in everyday advisory practice, how they are dealt with, and possible implications for forest policy. Four main challenges are identified: climate change; the heterogeneity of forest owners; resource constraints and funding cutbacks; and competing and conflicting advice. The analysis finds that the forest consultants have developed the following professional capacities to meet these challenges: articulating uncertainties, advocating risk diversification, and using historical references to handle the long-term risk associated with climate change; contextualizing the advice to meet the needs of a heterogeneous group of forest owners; and organizational decoupling, whereby consultants prioritize advisory activities at the expense of other tasks. The study concludes by discussing the implications of these strategies for the forest consultants and forest policy but also what can be learned from the Swedish experience.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Fostering a flexible forest is an ambiguous task. A flexible forest is one that can accommodate future uncertainties, such as climate change and shifting market demands, and creating such forests is a central aim of many forest nations around the world. It also describes a deregulated forest management system that lends considerable discretion and flexibility to the forest owners. Under such circumstances, translating national forest policies into practice becomes challenging. This study explores how a specific group of forest professionals charged with this task – publicly employed forest consultants in Sweden – experience and deal with this challenge.

Historically and today, the Swedish economy depends heavily on forestry. About half of Sweden is covered with productive forest (23 million ha) and in 2014 the forest sector accounted for 11% of the total goods exports, with a gross output of about 22 billion EUR (SFA 2015:294). The sector employs 80,000 people, constituting 2% of the labor force. Governing this economic and environmental resource is an important political task, but it is also a complicated one due the forest ownership structure. About 80% of the productive forest land is privately owned: 50% by small-scale private owners, 25% by private companies/corporations, and 6% by other private owners. This is a rather high proportion of private ownership compared to other countries,

both in Europe and on other continents (McDermott et al., 2010; Pulla et al., 2013). Thus, forest ownership in Sweden has previously been surrounded by strict regulation – including mandatory reforestation, weeding and thinning, etc. However, since the 1994 Forest Act, the Swedish forest management system is characterized by deregulation, the governing principle being “freedom with responsibility.” This does not mean that the state has lowered its ambitions regarding forests, but reflects a general and global reorientation from “government to governance” that is also present in the forest sector. Here, as Humphreys (2009) argues, neoliberal ideology plays a part, but it has also been amalgamated with other discourses within the forest sector – such as sustainable management and conservation – together forming a strong and global discourse of deregulation. In essence, the responsibility for implementing forest policy is being shifted from the state to the private sector (FAO, 2007; Hysing, 2009; Holmgren et al., 2010), and non-state regulatory approaches – such as forest certification – have increased in importance around the world (McDermott et al., 2010). Of course, there are still legal requirements within Swedish forestry (e.g. regarding felling and re-plantation), but the government mainly strives to influence forest owners and forest companies by using information, advice, and recommendations (Appelstrand, 2012). Activities such as weeding and thinning are now optional, and reforestation demands are less strict. Environmental preservation is stressed (and given equal priority with the production goals), but to a large extent depends on the willingness of the forest owners. Swedish forest policy now rests on the assumption that forest owners can be persuaded

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [rolf.lidskog@oru.se](mailto:rolf.lidskog@oru.se) (R. Lidskog).

to do more than the law requires. The Swedish Forest Agency (SFA) and its employed forest consultants have a central role to play in achieving this. During 2014, about 30,000 forest owners participated in individual field activities or group activities, and 16,000 participated in face-to-face advisory activities organized by the SFA (SFA 2014: 51). This service is free of charge. Also, the forest consultants meet forest owners in their supervisory role (felling and re-plantation are regulated by the Forest Act) and when delivering commercial services such as courses and plans for felling.

It is not society per se but specific organizations and professionals that handle risks i.e. that understand them and develop strategies for their handling (Boholm et al., 2012). Forest consultants shape forest policy outcomes by interpreting rules and allocating public resources. They can be considered “street-level bureaucrats”: they produce public policy as citizens experience it (Lidskog and Löfmarck, 2015; Lipsky, 2010; Meyers and Vorsanger, 2007). However, in contrast to most other street-level bureaucrats (teachers, police-officers, social workers, etc.) they are also charged with the difficult task of achieving policy goals not clearly backed up by formal regulation. Thus, they make up an important part of the forest policy-making community and exercise a form of political power in their everyday activities. This makes it important to study the qualitative nature of these activities. The research questions are as follows: What are the intrinsic challenges in the everyday advisory practice of forest consultants? What strategies are available for meeting these challenges? What are the possible implications for the forest policy output?

The paper is organized into four parts, the first being this introduction. The second part outlines the methods and materials of the study: an interview study of forest consultants and how they perceive and handle challenges in their advisory activities. The third part presents the results, beginning with the challenges perceived and then moving on to the professional capacities and strategies they have developed in order to manage them. The fourth part discusses the implications of these strategies, both for the professional role of the forest consultants and for the Swedish forest policy. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these strategies for the forest consultants and forest policy.

## 2. Methods and materials

The empirical data consists of an interview study of forest consultants employed by the SFA. In Sweden, the forest ownership structure varies geographically, with the southern part of the country consisting mainly of non-industrial private forest owners and the northern part mainly of state-owned or larger privately owned companies or corporations. There are also regional differences in the size and composition of the forest. Therefore, consultants were selected from five geographically dispersed regions as well as from rural and urban areas in order to transcend local and regional conditions and capture more general circumstances related to forest consultancy.

A letter was sent to 59 forest consultants of which 19 agreed to take part in the study, 4 declined, and 36 did not respond at all. Only two out of the nineteen interviewees were female, which reflects the general male dominance in the occupation (cf. Wickman et al., 2013). All were experienced consultants (having worked an average of 22 years at the SFA). All but one had a professional university degree.

The interviews were conducted between October 2014 and January 2015. They were semi-structured with an interview guide that allowed for asking follow-up questions and expanding on themes that arose during the interview. The qualitative interview is a process of meaning-making work, and the respondents are seen as competent to describe their situation and experience (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). This ascribes a rather active role to the interviewer, allowing her to suggest alternative narrative positions and interpretations during the interview in order to facilitate meaning-making. Such active interviewing requires that a variety of perspectives are tried out in follow-up

questions, and is therefore time consuming. In return it yields a rich body of material with many nuances and details.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. A contextualized thematic analysis was conducted (Boyatzis, 1998; Bryman, 2012) using NVivo software for the analysis of qualitative data. The process of thematic coding aimed to reconstruct the qualitative nature of everyday forest consultancy and consisted of three main steps. The transcripts were read line-by-line in order to find various themes. After this open and tentative coding a focused and selective coding was performed, further developing the initial codes that made the most analytical sense in terms of the problem under study (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014) and were broadly represented in the data. Special attention was paid to thematizing everything that was said about the general working conditions of the consultants, particular challenges, and ways of dealing with them. This resulted in the two main analytical themes “challenges” and “strategies,” their respective sub-themes, and several themes of a more descriptive nature. As a last step, theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978) was applied to the existing themes; i.e. a more deductive approach was used where themes were further developed by relating them to relevant theories.

As in all studies – quantitative or qualitative – valid and reliable results are not necessarily transferable to other contexts than the studied one. This study has a qualitative design, involving more intensive methods of data analysis and therefore smaller samples or fewer cases than in quantitative designs. This methodological choice makes it easier to gain an accurate and deep understanding of complex issues but harder to make empirical generalizations (Kvale, 2007; Marshall, 1996). Still, meaningful research always involves making statements that go beyond a particular case or sample. Even if it is not possible to make statistical generalizations from this study, due to the small and non-representative sample, it is possible to draw more general conclusions about the conditions and challenges of providing advice in contexts similar to the studied one. Thus, we cannot judge the extent to which the described challenges and strategies are felt and applied by all forest consultants in Sweden, but we can state that they exist, make them visible, and provide in-depth knowledge on how they function. Furthermore, this knowledge is also of relevance to other countries whose forest governance system uses advisory practices as steering instruments.

## 3. Results

The results are divided in two subsections below; we first present the challenges addressed by the forest consultants and then the strategies employed to deal with them.

### 3.1. Challenges in the practice of forest advisory services

The thematic analysis finds four broad challenges experienced by the consultants in their advisory practice. By “challenges” we mean factors identified by the consultants as making it difficult for them to perform their task (i.e. to give advice that is made use of by the forest owners).

*Climate change* involves uncertain knowledge and long-term risks. The interviewees feel certain that climate change is taking place, and this is also a central tenet of the SFA and indeed of most national forest agencies around the world; hence forestry is an increasingly central part of the international climate change agenda (FAO, 2011). The uncertain knowledge concerns the specific consequences, rate, and magnitude of climate change, as well as what countermeasures are most effective. An illustrative and basic example of this complex of problems is the (biological) fact that tree species that are optimal for a future changed climate may not grow well today. The consultants' uncertainties about these questions reflect those in the scientific debate on the subject, implying that there is no certainty to be found by reading up on the scientific literature. A related problem is that of divergent planning horizons,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6544919>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6544919>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)