



Comparative analysis on the communication strategies of the forest owners' associations in Europe[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This research reports a comparative analysis of the communication strategy that forest owners' associations across Europe use to influence society on one side and the decision-makers on the other, in order to fulfill forest owners' interests. 60% of Europe's forests are privately owned by an estimated number of 16 million forest owners, who are represented by forest owners' associations. One of its main functions is to influence the public perceptions on forests and forestry. In this article it is analyzed how a specific forestry stakeholder fixes its strategies to communicate with and lobby society in order to get acceptability for their proposals/demands. Open-end surveys have been used as a source of information in 2006 and repeated in 2012. Besides of the comparison among countries, a comparison along the time has been also performed. The whole communication frame is analyzed, considering the objectives, the structure, the messages, the channels, and the evaluation. The main conclusions that arise are: first, the temporary comparison (2006–2012) results into an improvement in several issues; second, there is room for improvement of professionalization of communication in forest owners' associations in Europe; third, social research into public perception of forestry might help to define communication strategies.

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1. Introduction

Forest sector is not profitable directly in most areas of the World. When forests produce more environmental services than direct products, the corresponding governance mechanisms are key, especially in non-state ownership. In urban societies forests are key for recreation and their management is overlapping with that use. Conflicting views on forest management arise as forests become the backyard of the people. Therefore in order to overpass market failures, social support is needed to finance the expenses which keep the sustainable forest management ongoing; very especially in cases of high risks (e.g. forest fires in Mediterranean region, and in mountainous regions) and on reconstruction needs.

Communication is a particularly important task, because forestry is a minority issue in most countries, mainly due to its weak economic relevance for society in the context of a strongly urbanized society. This

means that in the market-oriented political systems, the articulation of forestry in the media becomes a challenge, which consequently has to be put a lot of effort into communication to be heard by the society and its politicians (Moscovici et al., 1994).

European studies of public perception (European Commission, 2009) reveal that forestry issues are not well understood outside the small forestry community and suggest that there is a significant gap between public understanding and reality. Public participation concerning forestry issues hasn't been as successful as expected (Aasetre, 2006; Saarikoski et al., 2010). The recent proposal for an EU Forest Communication Strategy (European Commission, 2011) reinforces the idea on the need of further knowledge on this subject, as it has been materialized under the concept of the International Year of Forests 2011, and the international day of the forests (March 21) from 2013 onwards.

Forests are widely in private ownership in most European countries (more than 70% in Western Europe and less than 50% in Eastern Europe, but increasing), consequently their management is dependent on its owners' decisions (FAO, 2011). Therefore private forest owners are in most countries an important link within the forest sector chain, and they get a voice, with their claims considered, as far as they are organized around an association. Those claims differ, as private forest owners present different management motives around Europe (Pollumae et al., 2014; Novais and Canadas, 2010). Even some basic data on forest owners, are not well known in Europe (FAO, 2010), as

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for example could be: total number of forest owners, profile of forest owners, sizes of ownerships, personal investment in forests, revenues to investments, etc.

Within this frame of communication in the forest sector, this paper analyzes the strategies concerning how FOAs (Forest Owners' Associations) communicate to decision-makers and to society in general. This article is not aiming a theoretical discussion on the subject, but analyzes facts and discusses on how FOAs' strategies on communication and lobbying could be improved in a practical way. Therefore the overall goal of the paper is to help better understand the lobbying and communication strategies of forest owners' associations, and its evolution during last years, because they can be very successful in influencing for the improvement of forestry and forest sector.

Timber prices for example, can be negotiated more efficiently organized around FOAs (Stordal, 2004) as well as supply flows can be channeled more efficiently. In addition, one of the main challenges is that the structure of family forest ownership is changing due to the age structure of the rural population, urbanization and inheritance.

Content analysis has been performed based on data collected by two surveys on national forest owners' associations around Europe (11 countries in 2006 and 13 countries in 2012).

The article starts focusing on the different strategies for communication and the elements that compose it. Then it points on forest sector and forest owners. The results of the survey are presented according to the different elements that compose a communication frame process, to finally discuss on how to improve FOAs' performance.

2. Objectives

The objective of this article is to analyze through a case study the strategies used by forest owners' associations in Europe to communicate and lobbying with society as well as with the decision-makers. It combines two comparative analyses, between countries and between years. This analysis would contribute to the forest owners' associations in order to bring further knowledge and therefore improve the FOAs' actions of lobbying towards a more successful result.

3. Strategies for communication and lobbying

Lobbying is a communication activity (Tusinski, 2009), and as such follows a typical communication model with its four main components as source–message–channel–receiver (Berlo, 1960). Otherwise from a theoretical framework, in our view of lobbying as a social interaction, our interpretation is closer to the more developed social constructionist (Craig, 1999) who considers communication to be the product of the interactants sharing and creating meaning.

The concept of lobbying appears in theories of social influence as the process whereby people (through interest groups) directly or indirectly influence the thoughts, feelings and actions of others. It is linked to the expression and opinion rights of the organizations in those matters of public debate which could affect them directly (Bach and Unruh, 2005). Another definition is to analyze and understand a problem, in order to explain its relevance and consequences to those who hold the power to decide.

However reconciling the demands of self-interested private interests with the interest of wider civil society represents the central problem of democratic life (Greenwood and Thomas, 1998). If lobbying is then seen as mutual beneficial exchange of information, therefore interest groups are representatives of organized civil society with capacity to contribute to democratic legitimacy.

The interest groups (or stakeholders) are individual groupings around particular common interests, which have as their substantial target the defense of these interests. According to the nature of these groups, they can be classified into the groups that defend material

interests and those groups that defend the interests of morals and ideas (Ok, 2005). In the case presented at this article, forest owners have a mixed profile, because partly they defend economic interests as profitability, asset protection and freedom to manage their forests, but they also defend philosophical ideas concerning Nature itself, heritage or cultural landscape. Furthermore their personal attachment to their estates often has much more weight for traditional reasons (a forest that belongs to the same family for many generations) or values (environmental awareness).

Stakeholders show their interests to both decision-makers and to the society, as they need public support to address their interests to decision makers. Stakeholders use different communication tools to address to these two target groups of communication receivers (Janse, 2007). Public's perceptions as well as stakeholders' interests should be analyzed (Fabra-Crespo et al., 2012), for matching them and make them compatible, in order to produce proper communication strategies, which will reach the decision-makers whilst having the adequate social support (Cox, 2006). Full understanding on how communication flows in both senses, decision-makers to society and other way around, is a key factor in any policy analysis. Communication from stakeholders can be aimed straight at the politicians and decision-makers or indirectly through society as a whole or a group of representatives such as a group of environmental activists (Fazio and Gilbert, 2000).

An example of influence on forest policy at the European level was during the creation of the Natura 2000, where both ENGOs and forest owners' associations pursued lobbying strategies to influence the new legislation (Weber and Christophersen, 2002).

According to the new model of effective lobbying strategies (Jaatinen, 1998) there are three main factors that constitute the contingency factors that are the following in order of importance: the opinion of the target of lobbying on certain issue, the direction and intensity of competition, and the support of mass media and citizens. The combination of states of these contingency factors leads to a different strategies to follow (Jaatinen, 1999).

In order to achieve a strategy, two main tactics can be adopted, treetops and grassroots tactics (Fig. 1). Treetops tactics (direct lobbying) involve activating smaller (than in grassroots) numbers of more influential citizens to contact their local government representatives (Xifra, 1998). These are people with contacts and political savvy who can identify many business people or respected citizens able to clearly present the client's viewpoint on an issue. This is direct lobbying, which means negotiation via argumentation. This negotiation can be official or officious, public or secret.

Nowadays in the shift from representative to participatory democracy, decision-making shall be shared among those who have the responsibility to implement the measures (Buttoud and Samyn, 1999; Primmer and Kyllönen, 2006). In fact, many forest laws have been reformed in recent years around Europe and globally, and in some way or other they include the compulsory requirement to include the main forest stakeholders in policy decision-making processes. This often includes the constitution of official advisory bodies as well (Zimmermann and Schmithüsen, 2002). Consequently new participatory decision-making bodies have been constituted in many countries for many sectors (Cost e19, 2004), which is found an appropriate arena for treetops lobbying.

A different approach is the grassroots tactics (indirect lobbying) which means taking action on public opinion, in order to indirectly influence decision-makers' viewpoints (Cottle and Howard, 2012). The main goal is to change their awareness about forestry, through grassroots actions which first creates the public interests for an issue (Ghai and Vivian, 1992). Grassroots campaigns including mass media play with the feelings, mobilizing family, friends and neighbors. The rationale for this (influence of the mass media) is that politicians have to worry about being reelected, so they care what voters think.

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