



Towards co-ownership in forest management: Analysis of a pioneering case 'Bosland' (Flanders, Belgium) through transition lenses



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ABSTRACT

Forest management in Western-Europe is evolving towards multifunctionality and higher levels of sustainability. Co-owned forest managing models, where different owners collaborate and forest users participate however, are still rather an exception of a rule. Bosland (literally forest-land) in Flanders (Belgium) is a statutory partnership of several public forest owners and stakeholders, managing an area of about 22,000 ha of previously fragmented forest relicts. By looking at this case through transition lenses we describe a pioneering case in forest management where a new way of management is adopted more geared towards management for coherence across multiple ecosystem services and across a multitude of stakeholders. By use of a learning history we were able to reconstruct the change trajectory of Bosland. Analysis of this change trajectory through transition lenses aided to identify essential key features in which Bosland differs from 'management as usual' approaches:

- (i) a distinctive paradigm shift towards management for coherence;
- (ii) a long term vision that informs and guides the short-term action agenda;
- (iii) a bottom up approach focusing on participation and co-creation.

The methods used and lessons learnt in Bosland can thus be highly interesting for the wider community involved in forest and nature management.

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1. Introduction

Belgium is one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, with a population density of 364.3 inhabitants per square kilometre (Eurostat, 2011a) and it has a relatively low forest cover of 23% (Eurostat, 2011b) compared to the European average of 111.92 p/km² and 47% respectively. The European Environment Agency assessed the country on its land use and recommended that: 'Belgium must manage land use carefully in the future. The challenge is on the one hand to allow for the development of social and economic activities based on land, and on the other hand, to protect the integrity of natural resource systems and the output of ecosystem goods and services which can also bring economic and social benefits in the long term.' (EEA, 2010). This advice seems especially legitimate for Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, where forested land is scarce and severely fragmented. With a forest land cover of less than 11% (INBO, 2012; Van Herzele, 2006), the forest surface per capita of the region is smaller than any country

in Europe (European Commission, 2011). The remaining forest relicts are of value in multiple ways, as they provide several ecosystem services, such as natural habitats for biodiversity, green refuges and open spaces for recreation, flood regulation, purification of water and air, carbon sequestration and provision of wood and biomass (Hermy et al., 2008; Liekens et al., 2013).

Effectively and coherently deploying the diverse forest-related services involves a wide range of societal actors and thus requires a land management style that is fit to deal with complexity and participation of stakeholders. In that perspective, the 'established' forest management approaches are not well-equipped to deal with these issues in the most effective way. More recently, several tools have been developed that allow forest management (planning) that unites multiple services (Pukkala and Kangas, 1993; Pukkala and Miina, 1997; Wolfslehner et al., 2005). Implementation however lags behind, especially in cases where a broad variety of stakeholders is involved. In addition, land management and planning approaches should go beyond management of one ecosystem and collaborate on a landscape scale, especially in highly urbanised regions such as Flanders. To evolve towards a new kind of multifunctional and actor supported forest management, an approach appropriate to unite the diversity of potential values, services and stakeholders desires or claims needs to be enrolled.

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This switch is quite a challenge for Flanders, because of the current largely disintegrated forest ownership and management: 70% of forest is divided among more than 100,000 private owners (Serbruyns and Luysaert, 2006). The Flemish government is encouraging cooperation by stimulating private forest owners to unite in forest groups (Van Gossum et al., 2005), organized as subsidized non-profit organizations. Despite these good intentions, co-owned forests supporting multiple purpose management and coordination at a landscape scale remain scarce in Flanders indicating that ‘traditional’ top-down policy instruments are not sufficient/well-suited to achieve that very objective (Van Gossum et al., 2005; Van Gossum et al., 2012).

The current challenges in forest management call for a new approach that actively includes stakeholders in the decision making process by combining bottom up and top down methods. In other words, a change process with a specified direction targeting the culture, structure and practice components of society concurrently is needed. An approach that addresses such kind of challenges is the one of transitions and transition management (Grin et al., 2010). A transition is defined as “a radical, structural change of a societal (sub)system that is the result

of a co-evolution of economic, cultural, technological, ecological and institutional developments at different scale levels” (Kemp et al., 2001). A number of anticipated transitions regarding energy, resources, biodiversity, etc. will require new practices, institutions and policy frameworks to deal with the limited space in a smarter and more sustainable manner. In this paper we reconstruct the change trajectory of ‘Bosland’ using a learning history like approach. Subsequently we examine the history of Bosland by the semantics of transition theory to support identification of innovative aspects and key features that go beyond innovation as usual and which may be of inspiration for a wider public involved in forest management.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Bosland

Bosland (51.17°N 5.34°E) covers the area of three municipalities (Hechtel-Eksel, Overpelt and Lommel) in the North-West of the Limburg province (Fig. 1). Currently the project is managed by a

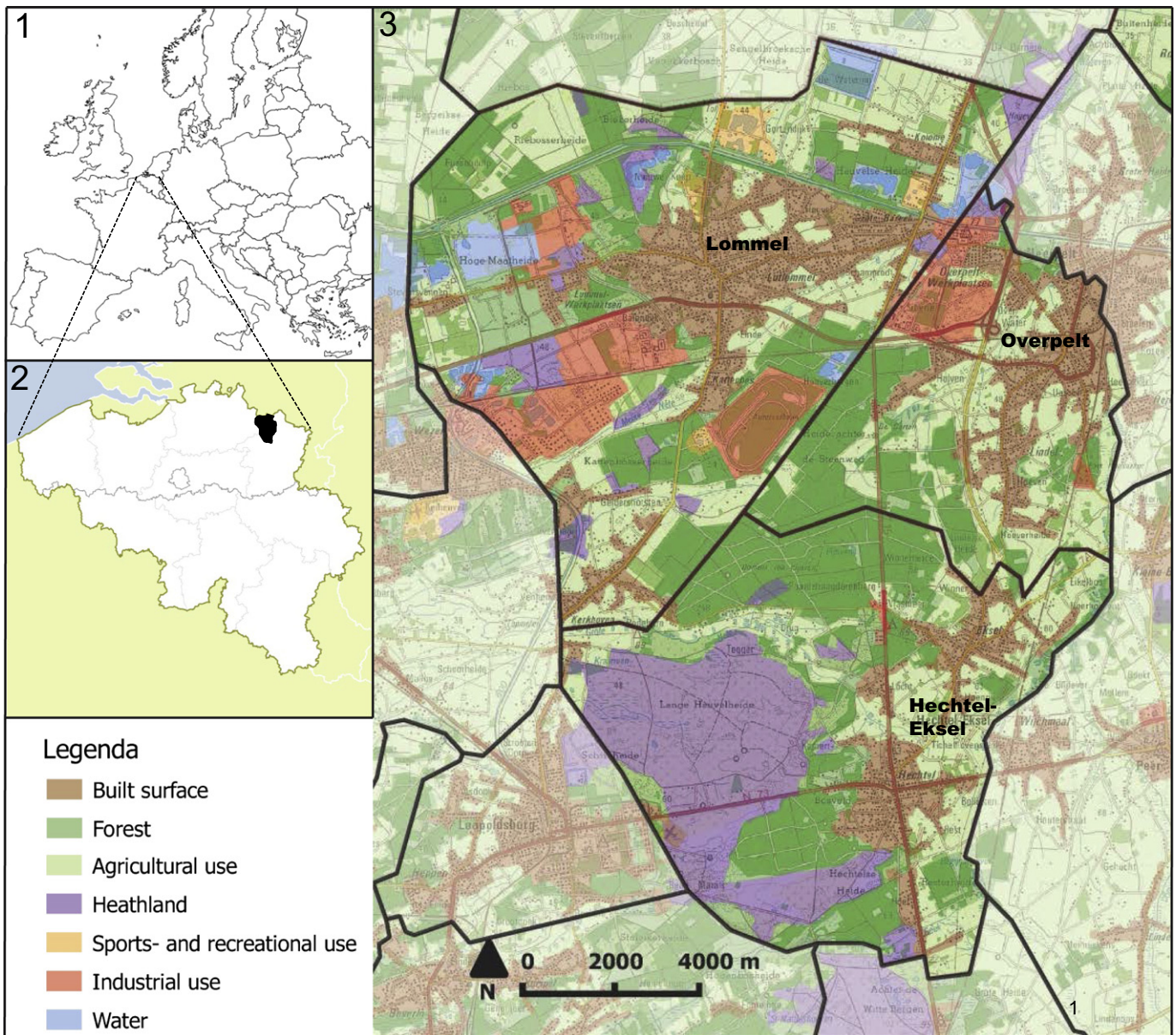


Fig. 1. Situation of Belgium in Europe (left top) and Bosland in Belgium (left middle) and a land-cover map of Bosland (right). The heart of Bosland exists in forests that are used to be managed by the different owners and are now managed together.

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