
The Importance of Mediterranean Forests

Benefits to society

The Mediterranean forests provide a wide range of important benefits and services to society that go far beyond traditional forest products. Furthermore, they represent one of the planet's important centres of plant diversity, with estimated 25,000 species of which around half are endemic. The forests of the Mediterranean region are essential to maintaining water and soil resources. The forests protect watersheds and regulate the local climate by increasing the air humidity and thereby reducing the intensity of drought. In this way, they are a barrier against desertification. The forests also serve as natural barriers to storms and floods and they have considerable water retention capacity that reduces run-off and landslides during periods of heavy rain.

Forests have always played, and still play, an important role in the daily life of the Mediterranean peoples. People have been harvesting forest animal and plant products on a large scale in the region for thousands of years, developing numerous uses and management systems and acquiring sophisticated knowledge of their environment. In the past, forests and trees attributed long-standing cultural values that have defined the Mediterranean landscapes. Many endangered ecosystems and rare, endemic species in the Mediterranean still coexist in close relationship with humans.

Although Mediterranean forests provide low direct economic returns on wood products in comparison to the Northern European forests, they play a crucial role in maintaining key components for securing human welfare and life in the region. For instance, forests of the Northern Mediterranean region support tourism in a major way by providing recreation opportunities and scenic value. Given the significant differences in economic and social development across the region, the role of forests in society varies greatly between on one hand the Northern Mediterranean and the Eastern and Southern parts of the Mediterranean on the other.

Threats to Mediterranean forests

Previously, exploitation of the natural landscape was long, slow and relatively sustainable. In the past decades, that balance between nature and humankind has been lost. The forests are fragile and under threat. Intensive agricultural practices and climate change threaten many of the rare species that characterize the Mediterranean region. Other major causes of forest damage in the Mediterranean include fires, clearance and degradation mainly due to ill-conceived land use policies and development pressure. Moreover, grazing is still considered by many to be a threat to the regeneration of European Mediterranean forests, yet it is also a factor that maintains biodiversity richness and diversity.

Although considerable efforts have been made to restore forest areas in the Mediterranean, the tree planting schemes used have often failed to restore the range of forest goods and services necessary to maintain healthy ecosystem integrity and to generate socio-economic benefits for local people. Decision-makers and practitioners have to consider how they can start to rebuild forest assets for both people and nature. Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR) aims to do exactly that.

Considerable forest landscape restoration work has been undertaken in EU countries of the Mediterranean region, with a range of outcomes. The following recent forest landscape restoration activities efforts, for example, have attempted to balance socio-economic and ecological concerns:

- Around Athens, Greece, two areas of burnt Aleppo pine forests are being restored through natural regeneration and planting of native species.
- In South East Alentejo a Portuguese NGO, ADPM (Association for the Defense of the Mertola Heritage) is restoring degraded Holm oak forest, also by use of natural regeneration and planting of native species.
- In three NATURA 2000 sites in Central Spain forest rehabilitation is being undertaken by ADENA by introducing local species that enhance the economic and ecological value of the protected areas. The project receives financial support from the EU through the LIFE Programme.

Given the importance and fragility of the Mediterranean forests as well as the critical threats that they face, efforts to improve and continue forest landscape restoration in the Mediterranean region are called for.