**A Taste of Forestry in Finland**

Finland is Europe's most heavily-forested country. Forests as defined by the FAO cover 23 million hectares or 74.2% of the land area.

In Europe, Finland is a "forest giant", there being over sixteen times more forest per capita than in European countries on average. Finland's forests have been intensively harvested over the last few decades. Despite the loss of land after the last wars, its forest reserves are now greater than ever before in the 20th century, and they are continuing to grow.

Finland's forests are probably the most intensively studied in Europe. Since the beginning of the 1920s, they and especially the wood resources that they contain have been inventoried and monitored in a great variety of ways. The inventory system now in use incorporates about a hundred variables, which relate not only to the volume and composition of wood resources, but also to such matters as soil, vegetation cover and the health of trees. Few non-experts taking a stroll in a Finnish forest are very likely to realize that the ecosystem surrounding them is the subject of such precise monitoring and statistical recording.

The total volume of stock in Finnish forests amounts to nearly 2 billion cubic metres. This amount of timber would make a 10-metre wide and 5-metre high wall around the globe.

For as long as there has been an independent Finland, the increment of stock has exceeded harvesting volumes and natural drain. Today the annual increment is about 75 million cubic metres, whereas around 60 million cubic metres or less are harvested or die of natural causes. Of the total logged area, regeneration felling accounts for roughly one third and thinning two thirds.

Geographically, most of Finland is situated at a latitude of between 60 and 70 degrees north. A significant area extends north of the Arctic Circle. The climate in Finland and Scandinavia is influenced by the Gulf Stream bringing warm water from the Atlantic. Thanks to this, there are forests even in the northernmost parts of Finland. Areas located equally far north in Russia and North America are mainly tundra, a treeless wasteland, because of the cold climate.

Winters in Finland are quite mild, and summers are temperate although of short duration. In the south, winter lasts about three months, in the north about six months. In wintertime, the ground is covered by snow, and temperatures usually drop below zero degrees centigrade. Despite the briefness of summer, there is a lot of light, enabling an intensive growing season.

Precipitation is sparse: on average 700 mm in southern Finland and 400 mm in the north. About half of this is snowfall. Around late winter, there can be more than a metre of snow in Lapland, less in the south. Many organisms would not survive the winter without the sheltering snow; the roots of plants would freeze and the cold would kill the animals moving at ground level.

Finland lacks real mountains but, on the other hand, the terrain is not altogether flat, either. The bedrock and the soil in general have been formed by the ice ages. The inland ice has eroded the bedrock, scraping off soil from here and leaving heaps there. In places the rock is totally exposed. The tens of thousand of lakes in Finland are post-glacial. Another unique phenomenon, land elevation, is also an effect of the glaciers. Finland is rising from the Baltic Sea at an annual rate of 0.5-0.8 cm, which means that its land area is continuously growing.

Various kinds of peatlands are a fundamental element of the Finnish landscape. In the cool and humid climate the soil becomes waterlogged, which creates the right conditions for peatland vegetation and the formation of peat. Originally, about one third of Finland was covered by peatlands. They have been drained for farming, forestry and peat extraction purposes. About half of the original peatland area has been preserved in its virgin state.

There are about twenty indigenous tree species growing in Finland, the most common ones being pine (Pinus silvestris), spruce (Picea abies) and birch (Betula pendula and B. pubescens). Usually two or three tree species dominate a forest. Naturally pure pine stands are found in rocky terrain, on top of arid eskers and on pine swamps. Natural spruce stands are found on richer soil. Birch is commonly found as an admixture, but it can occasionally form pure birch stands.

About half of the forest land area consists of mixed stands. Rarer species are found mostly as solitary trees. The south-western corner and the south coast of Finland are touched by a narrow zone growing oak, maple, ash and elm.