

New EU forest strategy for 2030: To improve the quantity and quality of EU forests

Forests are essential for our health and wellbeing, and the health of the planet. They are rich in biodiversity and are hugely important in the fight against climate change. The new EU forest strategy for 2030 is one of the flagship initiatives of the European Green Deal and builds on the EU biodiversity strategy for 2030. It recognises the central and multifunctional role of forests while setting a vision and concrete actions to improve their quantity and quality. It also aims at strengthening their protection, restoration and resilience. The EU's Forest Strategy also aims to adapt Europe's forests to the new conditions, weather extremes and high uncertainty brought about by climate change. This is a precondition for forests to continue delivering their socio-economic functions, and to ensure vibrant rural areas with thriving populations¹.

Following its General Assembly 2022, The European Union of Mountaineering Associations (EUMA) together with The European Ramblers' Association (ERA) approved the following position paper.

POSITION PAPER CONCERNING THE EU'S FOREST STRATEGY

Recently, the Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group II highlighted that healthy ecosystems are more resilient to climate change, host a larger biodiversity and provide life-critical services². The report states that it is necessary to protect and restore 30-50% of Earth's ecosystems, to adequately protect biodiversity and global cycles as well as to adapt to future levels of global heating.

Restoration of degraded forests (just as of other ecosystems) will also speed up sustainable development goals and will enable them to *store and remove* carbon from the atmosphere. This is also in accordance with the EU normative framework created by the EU Green Deal as well as particularly in the EU Biodiversity Strategy³ and EU Forest Strategy⁴.

Forests are of utmost importance for the European mountaineers and rambles via the sustainable **tourism** and nature-based **sports for all** (walking, hiking, mountaineering and rock-climbing) that they are practising. Consequently, a cautious and sustainable use of forest resources should be compatible with both the conditions required by the conservation of forest ecosystems and the EU provisions mentioned above.

¹ More info: https://ec.europa.eu/environment/strategy/forest-strategy_en

² <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-ii/>

³ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en

⁴ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/forest-strategy_en

(Eco)-tourism

IPCC is showing that recognition of environmental services from forests, such as carbon sequestration, the protection of the hydrological cycle and immaterial values such as the culture and education.

Nature-based tourism is receiving more attention as a tool for using forest areas sustainably, in accordance with the conservation requirements forests. We believe that there is still room for a cautious expansion of these initiatives, in accordance with the capacity of each forest ecosystem. The regional, national, and European public authorities could play a guiding role through different instruments, such as legislation or financial incentives.

Deforestation and forest degradation can be stopped or strongly reduced through strict protection of forest ecosystems, sustainable forest management policies and practices, or by providing economic returns from timber and non-timber forest products. In this sense, IPCC provides as an example – tourism⁵.

Protecting forest from extensive harvest typically results in *maintained or increased forest carbon stocks*, however it also brings about sustainable side businesses mainly in the tourism sector.

Eco-tourism is growing and nature has become a significant point of interest for tourists in Europe, in mountain areas as well as in hilly and lowlands. In natural forests, forestry and tourism can be combined in a harmonious manner.

In a recent report **on establishing an EU strategy for sustainable tourism, the European Parliament** called on the Commission to pay particular attention to mountainous regions and rural areas and underlined the importance of well-structured institutional cooperation with all interested regional actors, as well as the Committee of the Regions.

Also eco-tourism in mountain areas works for the strengthening of European cohesion. Cross-border routes for outdoor activities including rural or mountain tourism, promoted through specific networks supported by EU and national funding, can play a key role in connecting different Member State regions and managing tourism flows in an efficient and sustainable manner, while providing opportunities to boost economy in less developed regions (Report **on establishing an EU strategy for sustainable tourism by Cláudia MONTEIRO DE AGUIAR**⁶).

Together with the importance of the protection of forest ecosystems, an important part of the EU Forest Strategy is based on the forest bio-based economy boost, which aims at producing sustainable wood and non-wood materials, as well as material and immaterial products, including **eco-tourism**. In this sense, mountain huts are essential infrastructures and are part of the landscape and cultural heritage.

⁵ IPCC, Chapter 9, Forestry <https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/ar4-wg3-chapter9-1.pdf>

⁶ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0033_EN.html

Nature-based tourism and engagement in nature conservation could provide an alternative economic resource for the local populations in general and for those who might be impacted by increasing protection measures, particularly in remote rural areas where alternative sources of income and employment are relatively scarce.

We request:

- that the **right to roam**, or freedom to roam, as the general public's right to access certain public or privately owned land, waters or forests for recreation and sports in a responsible manner, is to be guaranteed at European level for every one without discrimination. We are also sensitive to matters that aim at curbing some persons' commercial interests from using this right as an excuse to make profit while they are making use of other people's private property. This demand also includes free access to all forest waymarked trails or footpaths, access to rock climbing areas in a responsible and regulated framework should be allowed to everyone and guaranteed.
- that all use of forests, ranging from wood harvesting to leisure, shall be carried out primarily in the public interest in accordance with the imperatives laid down in the EU Green Deal, EU Forest and Biodiversity Strategies, Habitats and Birds Directives.
- that the functions of the forests that entangle recreation, eco- tourism and education shall be integrated in all forest-related normative acts as well as in the strategies and recommendations of EU bodies and national governments.
- that mountain huts and rock climbing areas are considered as pillars of local economies in remote areas and that deserve special treatment and incentives in total respect of the ecosystem conservation requirements.
- that marked walking, hiking and mountain trails are a very important factor for citizens (not only for athletes) in eco-tourism.

Sports

We bear in mind that **access to sport** for all is considered to be a *fundamental right*, in accordance with the Recommendation CM/Rec(2021)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Revised European Sports Charter within the Council of Europe: "All human beings have an inalienable right of access to sport in a safe environment,[...], which is essential for their personal development and instrumental in the exercise of the rights to health, education, culture and participation in the life of the community"⁷.

Mountain sports are essentially taking place in nature. Athletes as well as mountain sports' amateurs need healthy food, clean air and water and a stable climate in the mountains as well as forest ecosystems, together with their habitats and species, in a favourable conservation status. Many sport activities are rooted in the outdoor environment, yet often policymakers are unaware of the value of nature in sport.

⁷ <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680a42107>

The European Commission has stated that public support for sport builds community cohesion, favours social inclusion and leads to a sense of European identity. Sport is therefore a vital part of what being European means, mentions the European Commission's webpage. EU financing programmes, such as *Erasmus+ Sport*, contribute to the development of the European dimension of sport and boost cooperation between organisations, public authorities, and other stakeholders.

Sport policy at EU level has been shaped by programmatic documents such as the European Union Work Plan for Sport (2017-2020) or the White Paper for Sport.

Walking, hiking, mountaineering, and rock-climbing are an important part of sport for all (recreation), of public health, as well as of local and regional economy as they entangle eco-tourism and the local development sourcing thereof.

Walking, mountaineering and hiking organisations are responsible for a wide range of marked walking, hiking and mountain trails in Europe that cover more than 1,200,000 km, as well as almost 12.500 rock climbing areas. Most trails and rock-climbing areas are in forest areas.

We request:

- that marked trails and rock-climbing areas in forests are deemed as important sustainable eco-tourism infrastructure. These trails, that include access to rock climbing areas, lay at the basis of nature-friendly and sustainable ways to access forest areas in the mountains.
- that forest exploitation shall not damage nor destroy marked trails (footpaths) including approach trails to rock climbing areas.
- that the European Commission creates a framework that favours the access to forest marked trails through public and sustainable transport with the least possible emissions and negative impact on the environment, habitats, and species.

European Union of Mountaineering Associations (EUMA) is an umbrella organisation of European mountaineering associations from 26 countries with approximately 3 million members.

European Ramblers' Association (ERA) is an umbrella organisation comprising 65 walking organisations from 35 European countries. This organisation has a total of more than 2,5 million individual members.