

Why engage in forest certification? – a Swedish perspective

Ake Granqvist

Stora Enso Forest

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Summary

Sweden has a long history of forest regulation and sustained production of wood. Public debate on forestry issues began in the late 1950s with the advent of large scale mechanisation. By the early 1980s environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS) had emerged and were beginning to have an impact on forest legislation. They began to have real impact when they succeeded in convincing some large customers to seek wood products from sustainably managed forests. New silvicultural and nature conservation strategies have been developed and are outlined which take into account customer concerns. The means of communication of the new strategies are outlined including the role of certification.

Background

The landholdings of all major Swedish forest industry companies are FSC certified today. How come that more than half of the total FSC certified forest area in the world is situated in Sweden?

To understand this, you need to be aware of developments in Sweden over the past 50 years, even over the whole of the 20th century. Sweden passed its first modern forest act in 1903. The act stipulated that forest must be regenerated after final felling. Over the intervening years forest legislation was developed further. These developments have resulted in a doubling of standing volume over the century, from 1,500 m³ to 3,000 m³ – despite a wood harvest of some 6,000 m³ over the same period. These figures demonstrate a truly sustainable resource, from the wood production point of view.

Public debate on forestry issues, emergence and impact of ENGOS

The mechanisation of the forestry operations started in the late 1950s. Large clearfelled areas were created by heavy, immobile equipment. The public debate about devastating the forest resources emerged. Over the following four decades the debate continued, with the main issues being:

- 60s – clearfelling
- 70s – chemical spraying (herbicides)
- 80s – nature conservation, biodiversity
- 90s – large scale forestry, leaving nothing untouched.

Over this period critics of the industry developed strategies to change forest practices. Around 1970 we faced action from small environmental groups, who chained themselves to our equipment to prevent us from using it. They also turned to the public to influence

opinion. Around 1980 the environmentalists began organising themselves in ENGOs. They also started to make politicians write new laws that restricted forest operations. Still they did not achieve what they wanted in terms of changed forestry practices. They found the key to success when they went to the market and convinced some major customers to ask for wood products to be sourced from sustainably managed forests. At that time, the ENGOs had created international networks. They promulgated lots of information about misbehaviour in the forests, which was easily and rapidly spread among different organisations. Computerisation did of course contribute to this.

From the industry's perspective this development, whereby customers became increasingly concerned about environmental issues relating to our raw material supply, was good. Earlier, when small groups of activists directed limited actions at a specific company, it was 'unfair' for the company which was the target. Nowadays, all companies play on the same pitch in a defined market.

Industry response to environmental issues

What strategies did the industry chose to handle the debate? My personal interpretation of the attitudes of the industry in the decades since 1950 is as follows:

- 60s – ignored the opposition,
- 70s – said “we are the professionals, you don't understand forestry”,
- 80s – started to listen, learn and cooperate,
- 90s – engaged in joint development of ecological engineering.

The forest industry in Sweden was an easy target for the environmental movement as there was a direct link from the central European wood market to large land holdings in Sweden. The main forest companies in Sweden own 38% of the productive forests in the country. From an international perspective this is unique. Normally industry depends to a greater extent on wood supply sources outside their own forests. This was the main reason for the Swedish forest industry being so sensitive in their forest operations to the concerns of the environmental movement. The direct link from the customer, through the marketing organisation to the industry and hence to large land holdings made the ENGO's efforts effective.

New silvicultural and nature conservation strategies

The forests of Stora Enso in Sweden are concentrated in the central part of the country. Forests in the area have been used for 500 years, as a source of fuel for mining and for iron processing operations. They have been cut again and again, and their biological diversity is definitely affected by that.

Stora Enso Forest Sweden is responsible for:

- the wood supply to the company's mills in Sweden (14 m m³/annum),
- management of the company's forests in Sweden.

Around 1990, we realised that it was time to reconsider our forestry operations due to the public debate. We knew that:

- sound forestry is environmentally friendly,
- forestry is one of the few sustainable industries,
- we had to review our strategies,
- we had to become proactive instead of reactive in operations and debate.

To achieve this we had to change attitudes, listen to and learn from our critics, cooperate with them and, most importantly, take the initiative. This was the start of the development of our new silvicultural and nature conservation strategies.

The silviculture department in cooperation with the corporate research functions and different external scientists developed the silviculture strategy.

The nature conservation strategy had to be developed through a process whereby our external critics as well as external scientists were invited to participate. To improve our own ability to address these issues and to improve our communication with the outside world, an ecologist was recruited in 1991. He was the first ecologist to be employed by a Swedish forest company, but not the last. Today all major forest companies in Sweden have ecologists employed on their staffs.

The first step was to design a development project where we could discuss all the relevant aspects of a new nature conservation strategy from different perspectives. The ecologist was made project leader. Project group members were assigned from the silviculture department as well as from the Ludvika forest management district where the project area was located. The location of the area (Grangärde, 70 km south of Falun) was chosen because the properties of the area are typical of the company's forest holdings. The size of the project area was 14,000 ha, of which Stora Enso owned 10,000 ha.

To address all relevant non-timber production questions a reference working group of people from outside of the company was recruited. I refer to them as 'scientific environmentalists', as they were scientists (who covered different fields) who were at the same time engaged in the environmental movement. These were specialists in interpretation of aerial infra-red images, landscape ecology, botany, ornithology, lichens and mosses. One represented the hunter's association. The working group met in the project area to solve all the practical problems that arose while developing the strategy. There were, of course, a number of contacts with other scientists during the project.

Three important results arose from the work of the reference group. First, we learned a lot about nature conservation; the group made us understand the fundamental importance of forest fire in our ecosystems. Second, they helped us to find smarter and more cost-effective solutions to different problems than those we found ourselves. Finally, as part of the process, they told their networks what was happening, people outside the company realised that something big was happening.

The new nature conservation goal that was formulated was that the company would preserve the biological diversity at the landscape level (5,000-25,000 hectares). Formerly lots of discussions and energy were spent on trying to rescue every single species on every area to be harvested. We realised in the project that this is not the way that nature works. A forest fire is completely devastating for the individuals of a species that happen to be in an area on fire. Earlier we did not consider the time factor to the extent necessary to understand how species move around in the landscape over time. This finding was fundamental to creating the new goal.

Once the goal was spelled out, we had to find the strategy to achieve it. We found out that we had to mimic, as far as possible, natural forest processes in our operations. For that reason we had to develop and apply:

- an ecological landscape planning model,
- adapted management methods,
- day-to-day nature conservation measures.

To start with the last, day-to-day nature conservation involves all the daily decisions that

machine operators make, while deciding which individual or groups of trees to leave behind in a harvesting operation for retention. This includes determining border lines to lakes, streams, bogs, non-productive areas and so on.

Second, to restore natural habitats, which have been disappearing in our managed forests for more than 100 years, we have to reintroduce forest fire. Research has shown that in the natural state approximately 1% of the forest burns annually. Using prescribed burning on dry and mesic sites, all fire dependant species will find new habitats for their survival. On moist and wet sites, regeneration after harvesting takes place underneath the shelter of a comparatively dense seed tree stand.

Ecological landscape planning forms the basis for all operational activities. It aims at identifying and protecting key habitats, places where high conservation values can be found. Around those, dispersion facilities are created for the threatened species. Dispersion corridors connect wet and moist areas, winding like 100-200 m wide snakes of forest through the landscape. Dispersion areas surround dry and mesic sites, where prescribed burning is carried out in specially designed harvesting areas. Landscape planning also involves setting targets to satisfy the need for different habitats, like stands of broadleaved trees.

The nature conservation goal is not that difficult to achieve in itself. However, when taken together with the economic goals of the company, it becomes a challenge which requires well educated employees to handle.

When the board of directors gave its approval in 1993 to implement the two new strategies, it was only the beginning of a long learning and implementation process. Their introduction over the years has required a lot of information, education and practical exercises in the forest. The philosophy for the introduction was, that to achieve long-term results, the ordinary employees and long-term contractors must do the work. This requires time for educational and on-the-job training activities. However, it ensures that the new competence will remain in the company and it makes the employees proud of taking part in the process of change. All employees and contractors were held responsible for performance at their own workplace. It was also made clear to them that it was a learning process and that it was acceptable to make mistakes, as long as one learned from them.

To follow up the change in performance in the forest, an annual green balance sheet was produced for the first time in 1994. In the beginning there was a rapid improvement, and in 1997 the overall performance goal was nearly met. However, in 1998 there was a decline in performance. This was a sign that we have to continue the educational and support activities, but now on a more individual basis.

Public involvement, communication and certification

From a communications point of view, we now had to consider how to bring the message to the public that we have changed our forest management. To illustrate the different phases we have gone through in the forestry operations and the communications work, the following formulae are applicable:

<i>Sustainable Forestry</i>		<i>Trustworthy Messenger</i>		<i>Market trust</i>
0	X	0	=	0
0	X	1	=	0
1	X	0	=	0

In the beginning we did not practise sustainable forestry and we did not try to convince anyone that we did. When the public debate started we tried to tell the public that the then forest operations were sustainable. At that time foresters were still listened to. However, as forest operations did not change, that was criticised and the market trust was zero. When we eventually changed forest practices, the foresters' reputation was such that it was impossible to convey the message to the public – we were not trusted. So the question was, how should we communicate our new behaviour? Which messenger should we use?

- PR people? – No that did not work!
- Foresters? – Nobody believed us!
- Journalists – Not likely! They do not like to write positive articles about industry.
- ENGOS? – Yes, if they were satisfied with our performance!

What we needed was a third party verification of the changes and state-of-the-art performance in our operations. In 1995 certification through the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) reached Sweden, two years after we introduced the new strategies. By the end of the year, a major Dutch customer was the first to ask for FSC certified products. In the following years more and more customers asked for FSC certified products, nobody asked for ISO 14001 certificates or EMAS registration of the forest operations. Furthermore, the FSC concept was very much the concept of the green movement and hence it was accepted by our former critics.

This was the incentive we needed to look further into FSC certification. To get an understanding of it, we went through a certification evaluation of the Ludvika district, parallel to the development of the Swedish national FSC standard. In October 1996 the Ludvika district became the first forest management district to be certified in Sweden. By the end of 1998 all the management districts of Stora Enso in Sweden were certified.

This development makes it possible to add the last line in the above set of formulae.

<i>Sustainable Forestry</i>		<i>Trustworthy Messenger</i>		<i>Market trust</i>
0	X	0	=	0
0	X	1	=	0
1	X	0	=	0
1	X	1	=	1

Through changing our forest operations and finding a trustworthy messenger, we finally achieved market trust. It is important to point out however, that all major changes in our forest operations were introduced in advance of the possibility of FSC certification. The decision to change our strategies was market driven. When certification became an option it was what we needed to verify our new behaviour.

To conclude, public relations are much better nowadays. We have a constructive dialogue with the ENGOS. The ENGOS say yes to sustainable forestry. Negative publicity has almost ceased. Positive publicity is occurring for the first time, without the industry writing it.

We see certification and standardisation schemes such as FSC, ISO and EMAS as complementary options, not competing, and aim at introducing them all.

So the answer to the question in the title – Why engage in forest certification? – is simple: Lack of trust!