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Forests continue conquest of countryside

More and more of Switzerland is being reclaimed by forest. While this may appear to be a positive development, experts are concerned about biodiversity loss. Around 31 per cent of the country's surface area is blanketed by trees, and there has been an increase of nearly ten per cent in alpine areas since the mid 1990s.

This dramatic change to the landscape is most evident in the southern canton of Ticino - more than 50 per cent of its surface is now covered by forest. The growth is a blessing for wild animals such as deer and boar, but larger forests also mean fewer habitats for many bird species and butterflies. And the more monotone the alpine landscape, the less attractive it is for holidaymakers in a country with a significant tourism industry.

Trees now dominate the slopes where once cows, goats and sheep grazed. In the Onsernone valley, west of Locarno, the forest has taken over practically the entire area.

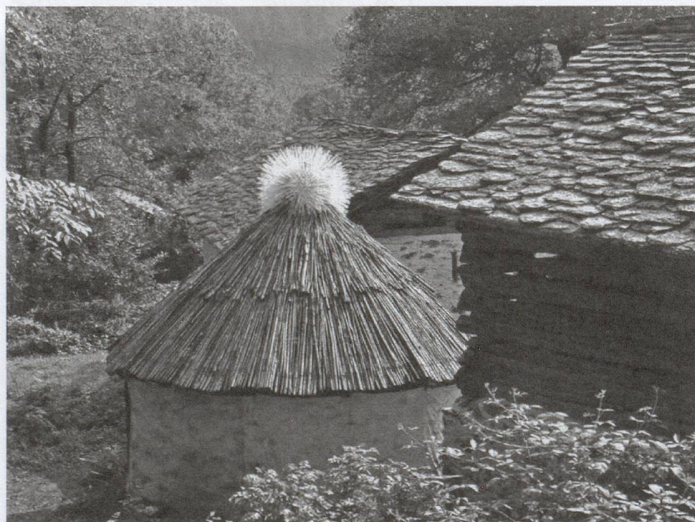
After farming ceases, bushes and shrubs consume pastures. Trees come next. And once the vegetation has reached this stage, there is no turning back. According to Swiss law, forests cannot be cleared.

The law came into being to prevent a repeat of the widespread deforestation of mountain slopes in the 19th century due to the high demand for timber, which was used mostly as fuel.

The bare hills often led to catastrophic flooding.

Measures to protect forests were first introduced in 1876. At the same time, trees as a natural resource became less important. Forests have been expanding ever since.

Farmers and landowners must be encouraged to continue grazing their livestock on mountain pastures.



Soglio, Ticino with chestnut forest in the background

In Malcantone, the authorities have been attempting to plant chestnut orchards to stop the trees in

their tracks. A citizen's committee in the village of Cademario is funding the replanting of a chestnut orchard. Part of a forest has had to be cleared, and to keep other trees from shooting up, a farmer is paid to graze his sheep. Tourists and locals really appreciate the orchard. But these are complex and expensive projects.

Another way of keeping the forest in check is to increase timber quotas. Currently, around 60,000 cubic metres of wood is harvested in Ticino each year. The canton has plans to raise this to 150,000 cubic metres in ten years' time.

This figure goes together with a rise in demand for wood as a local and renewable source of energy. Concerns about a repeat of the deforestation seen in the 19th century are unjustified; experts say that 500,000 cubic metres of wood grows each year.

The expansion of Swiss forests is also under scrutiny at the federal level. A parliamentary commission responsible for environmental land use and energy issues is calling for the introduction of new measures to halt uncontrolled growth.

PROTECTED FORESTS

Swiss policy seems contradictory. On one hand, forests are proliferating. On the other hand, more and more forested areas are coming under protection.

The idea behind this policy is to prevent rising timber demand from exploiting wooded areas left untouched for decades.

Switzerland has set aside around 800 wooded areas as reserves. Most are zones where economic activity is forbidden. A few received their special status in order to preserve threatened species.

Most of the reserves are only a few hectares in size. In total, they account for 3.2 per cent of all forested areas, which is small on a European scale. The authorities want to increase the figure to ten per cent by 2030.



TIMBER INDUSTRY

The Swiss timber sector was for many years an industry in decline, but has benefitted from rising demand for wood since 2003.

Spruce and fir account for 95 per cent of the wood processed at Swiss sawmills. Around 75,000 people are employed in the Swiss timber industry.

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