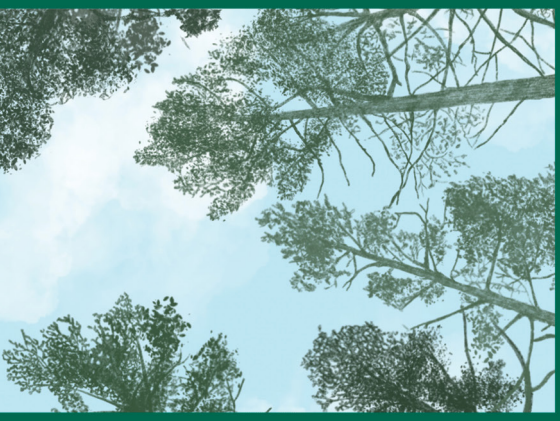


Green Dreams and Workforce Reality

Green Dreams and Workforce Realities

Title: Green Dreams and Workforce Realities

Editors:
Janina Priebe, *Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå University*
Irma Olofsson, *Department of Geography, Umeå University*
Emma Holmström, *Department of Southern Swedish Forest Research Centre, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences*
Johan Sonesson, *Skogforsk, the Forestry Research Institute of Sweden*
Shora Esmailian, *Department of Southern Swedish Forest Research Centre, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences*

Address:
SLU, Future Forests Skogsmarksgränd, 901 83 Umeå

October 2024
SLU, Future Forests

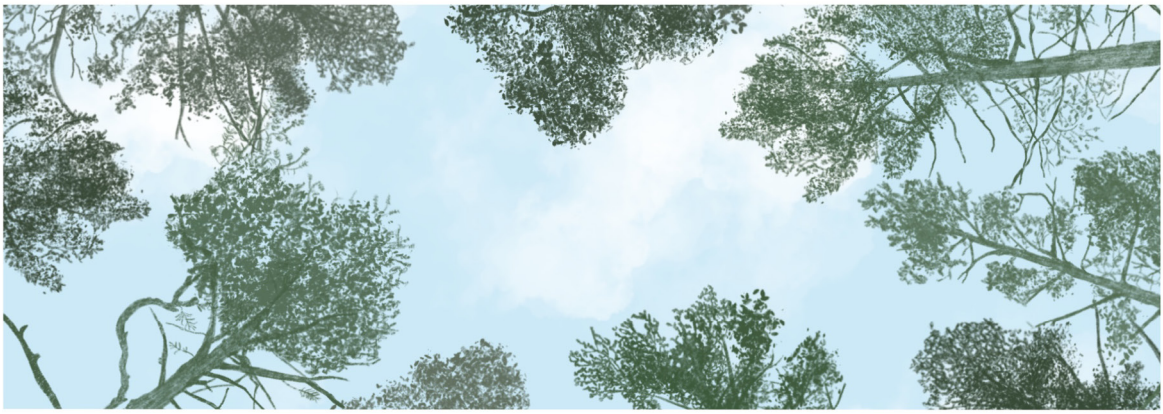
Future Forests Reports 2024:3

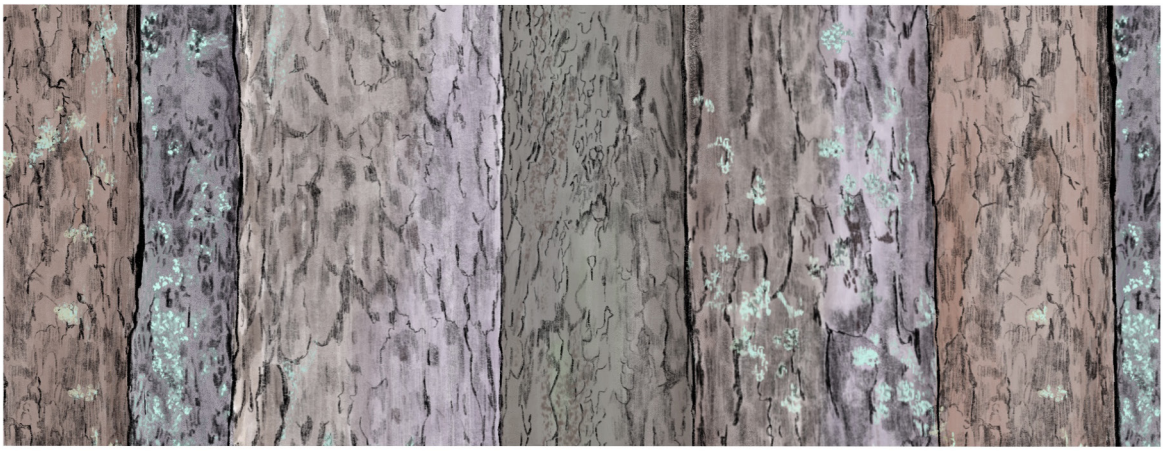
ISBN (printed version): 978-91-8046-662-2
ISBN (electronic version): 978-91-8046-663-9
DOI: https://doi.org/10.54612/a.25p20ub7l9

This anthology is the result of three workshops held at Umeå University, Uppsala University and online, where researchers met and discussed current and future research on forest work. All participating researchers from our organisations were invited to contribute their perspectives to the anthology, and the Future Forests working group also invited other researchers to contribute.

The anthology can be downloaded from: www.slu.se/futureforests

Publisher: Emma Holmström, *program director SLU Future Forests*
Graphic design: Ayman Osman
Illustrations: Eva Helena Larsson, *Umeå*





Introduction

Green dreams and workforce realities – The title of our anthology reflects upon the visions of a transition to a sustainable bioeconomy while acknowledging the societal effects and impacts of the forest sector on human life.

Sustainable development in forestry usually focuses on two perspectives; a future steady provisioning of wood supply, and a constant improvement of protection measures of species richness and habitats. The third dimension of sustainability, the societal aspect and human dimensions, typically remains invisible in the debate about the forest.

The idea of this anthology emerged from the workshop Green Dreams and workforce realities, held by Future Forests in collaboration with UmArts, the interdisciplinary Research Center for Architecture, Design and the Arts at Umeå University, on November 8, 2023. To capture the discussions this workshop initiated, we invited participating researchers as well as other researchers working on these issues to contribute to the anthology.

The variety of disciplines and perspectives, and the views on different structural levels and individual lives in forest work that this anthology brings together – we hope – will inspire further exploration of these directions in ongoing research on the Swedish forest sector workforce. We have invited researchers to reflect upon their ongoing research and to bring these insights together under a common theme: the human and social dimension of sustainability in the forest sector, driven and fueled by the "green dreams" that people bring to the forest, and the "green nightmares" that these too can sometimes become.

We, in the Future Forests working group, decided to present the contributions to this anthology according to the following themes: (1) Structures of the Swedish forestry sector. In this section, Francisco X Aguilar provides an overview over the present-day workforce in the Swedish forest sector. Thomas Petterson and Fredrik Olsson Spjut focus on the workers in harvesting operations and describe the structural transitions that took place since the 1990s towards outsourcing and independent contractors. Evans Korang Adjej focuses on the skills and mobility of workers in forest industries and the transition in the occupational landscape of forest work.

In the second section, (2) Berry picking and seasonal laborers, Charlotta Hedberg highlights the working conditions and wage structures of Thai berry pickers in Swedish forests, where the right of public access provides a freely accessible basis for commercial activities, while also shedding light on the potential for exploitation and unfair labor practices that can arise from such open-access resource systems. Anudini Wijayarathna describes how regulatory frameworks and taxation policies impact non-EU berry pickers entering Sweden, as well as their involvement in loans to finance their travel expenses and their vulnerability regarding travel restrictions due to these financial ob-

ligations. Irma Olofsson points out that in the forest industry, migrant workers, who make up the vast majority of the manual workforce, are in a vulnerable position in the labour market. The intersection of labor market regulations and immigration laws makes these workers a disadvantaged group within the workforce.

In the third section, (3) Organizations of the workforce, Thomas Kronholm and Carola Häggström explore the high accident rates in the forestry sector and identify key areas for improving regulatory non-compliance within the industry and the potential for future educational initiatives aimed at forestry contractors. Irma Olofsson, in her second contribution, presents findings from discussions with Swedish forestry workers' trade unions, revealing a system where regulations are frequently evaded, often at the expense of migrant laborers. Lotta Woxblom and Bodel Norrby writes about how networks for forestry entrepreneurs have helped business managers in the industry to exchange thoughts and ideas in order to face challenges like together.

In the fourth section, (4) Hierarchies and diversity in the forest workforce, Elias Andersson examines how gendered identities within forestry's organizational structures, marked by segregation, inequalities, and dominant masculinity, are a risk factor for the sector undergoing profound changes, with new technologies and new goals in the green transition. He also shows that efforts to promote gender equality often substitute rather than challenge masculine norms and values in decision-making. Emmeline Laszlo Ambjörnsson explores how female forest owners tend to adopt masculine traits and practices in their gender performances to contest their subordinate status and achieve recognition as legitimate forest owners. Petra Ek, Anders Mörk and Lotta Woxblom explores how the forestry industry is trying to solve the problem with the departure of contractors from the industry by involving and attracting students for recruitments and making the industry more attractive.

Sustainable forestry includes the social and human dimension. If the Swedish forest is to enable the transition to a sustainable society in the future, this must also include the people who work in the forest. The contributions to this anthology shed light on the human aspect of forestry work, which is frequently overshadowed by technological advancements and harvest productivity metrics. These contributions bring attention to the often-overlooked individuals who generate value in forest environments, making them visible beyond the physical resources found in the forest.

1

Structures of the Swedish forestry sector

Working hands: tracking numbers and contributions

Francisco X Aguilar
Department of Forest Economics, SLU

Sustainability requires an integrated approach, taking into consideration environmental concerns along with social and economic development. In Sweden, a set of Environmental Quality Objectives have been adopted to help describe the quality of the environment the country wishes to achieve. Environmental quality is a critical pillar in sustainable development and, since forests cover nearly 70% of the country's land base, Sweden's forests are central to attaining any environmental objective. Nevertheless, the Environmental Quality Objectives seem to be solely based on environmental or natural resource-centred outcomes. A recent Future Forest report[1] proposed and applied indicators adopted from the Montréal Process for the Conservation and Sustainable Management of Temperate and Boreal Forests to examine sustainability trends in the Swedish forest sector.

Here, I highlight some observations from that report and stress the key point of keeping the best available tally of the number of people working in the forest sector to be able to track development and facilitate that workforce's ability to respond to expected societal needs. Regarding forest resource conditions, the Report[2] suggests that evaluation of indicators for the 2000–2020 period point to overall progress in maintaining forest conservation and production areas. The following points are specific to the workforce of the Swedish forest sector:

- The forest sector workforce has added substantial economic value through the processing of wood and wood products
- The forest sector accounted for some 1.7% of total national employment as of 2020, with approximately 100,000 full-time working individuals
- The entire forest sector has experienced a decline in its workforce, and the pulp and paper industry has experienced a consistent and more pronounced decline than forestry overall or the wood and wood product industry
- Small-scale forest owners share just over 30% of self-employment in forestry work, including silvicultural measures through self-employment
- Through wood product export and hiring foreign workers, the Swedish forest

sector has, respectively, maintained a direct link to the consumption of wood products abroad and has helped support economic wellbeing in lesser-developed nations through wages from forestry and non-wood–based seasonal employment

An evaluation of past indicators also points to the need for data in the continuous evaluation of sustainable development in the forest sector. Data and research based on the best-available data will be central in, among some key metrics:

- Tracking workforce and resource efficiency: it will be crucial to keep track of workplace numbers, including self-employment, to better capture value-added to the workplace. Value-added metrics should not be limited to the formal trading of land and products, but should also include non-market values supported by the forest sector, such as recreation.
- Supporting adaptive forestry and products: climate change is expected to reshape forestry in Sweden. Likely, this can result in reshaping the industry, as well, responding to the supply of wood products and responding to societal demands for a sustainable bioeconomy. Sweden will need capable hands to engage in such a process, namely field level workers with scientific and technical expertise to engage in adaptive processes.
- Examining trade-offs: a continuation of workforce decline is somewhat expected. Technological and efficiency gains could help attenuate the impact of fewer people employed in the forest sector on the value added by the same sector, but only to a certain extent. It is important to try and anticipate critical needs, and create awareness and incentives about opportunities
- An interconnected workforce: Swedish forests and their workforces are a bridge to the rest of the world. To better capture the positive impact of the Swedish forest bioeconomy, it would be valuable to assess how wood product exports prevent the use of other less-sustainable products. The positive footprints of the wood products from our workforce are likely higher than those of other products.

At the end of the day, it comes down to informing the public and decision-makers about the need to adapt to changing workforce requirements, and the likely need for new hands and talent in the workplace to support sustainable development inclusive of environmental goals.

The author

Francisco X Aguilar is a professor of Forest Economics at SLU. He also serves as Leader of the United Nations' Economic Commission for Europe Team of Specialists on Forest Products and Wood Energy Statistics.

Endnotes

1 Ahammad, Ronju & Aguilar, Francisco X (2024): Socio-economic indicators for the assessment of sustainability in the Swedish forest sector, and linkages with the national environmental quality objectives, SLU Future Forests, Forest Faculty, FF report 24:1.

2 Ibid.

From integration and concentration to outsourcing and individualisation: the reorganisation of forestry work in Sweden since the 1990s

Thomas Pettersson & Fredrik Olsson Spjut
The unit of Economic History, Umeå University

From the 1800s until the 1950s, a contracting system was developed in Sweden in which a horse owner delivered timber to a logging site on behalf of a sawmill owner. The horse owner negotiated the price, administered the entire logging operation, and hired subcontractors in the form of forestry workers to carry out felling, timber storage, etc. After the introduction of new powerful machines, this type of contracting work disappeared in large-scale forestry.[1] As the machines were constantly being developed and new possibilities for more efficient solutions were continually tested, new organisational solutions were required. Moreover, several forestry companies introduced a centralised specialist function to take over much of the responsibility for both the operational work in the forest and the further development of the machines. When the skills of workers in the field increased, the next step was to decentralise responsibility for operational work to the district level within companies.

In the 1980s, as machine development began to slow down, with many forestry workers becoming fully fledged machine operators, some forestry companies took a step towards reorganising and outsourcing forestry work. How did outsourcing affect the forest workers, the markets, and the forest industry?

When forestry faced a cost crisis in the early 1990s, companies proceeded towards an almost complete outsourcing of harvesting. Forest workers were considered competent enough to run their own businesses, and companies (primarily SCA and MoDo/Holmen) did not want to tie up capital in expensive machines. There was also a supply of independent contractors who had emerged on their own in parallel and who competed well with the forestry companies' own machine resources. Companies' driving force was to increase productivity. Together with the incentives inherent in owning a company, this contributed to a strong cost transmission. Today, we can see that most of the Swedish harvesting volume is carried out by contractors. Contractors vary in size from one-man businesses to large companies with up to

30–40 employees.

The contracting market has been shaped by the procurement models of large forestry companies. There are, in practice, no effective markets; i.e., a situation in which many buyers compete with many sellers, and each seller can sell everything he produces at the market price. Monopolistic competition can be said to prevail in some locations. These sub-monopolies consist of special knowledge of, for example, local conditions, the buyer's quality standards, and personal relationships; i.e., everything that makes the buyer regard the harvesting service provided by a particular contractor as more or less unique.

Although the market situation for logging services may be reminiscent of what might be termed an 'oligopoly' – a situation in which a few large buyers dominate the market and determine the terms and conditions and set the price – this is not an entirely adequate description. The largest forestry companies have a high proportion of long-term contractors, with whom they have worked for many years and who, for the reasons given above, cannot easily be replaced.

In addition to the large forestry companies, there are also (particularly in southern Sweden) other buyers of harvesting services, such as large private forest owners, sawmills, etc. The contractor often lacks alternative customers in northern Sweden. Until now, there has also been a certain oversupply of harvesting services due to the strong rationalisation of forestry in recent years, which has meant that it has been a buyer's market.[2] In many places, this has led to the price being set by the buyer after adjustments for the cost development of machinery, fuel, and other inputs. The market price has therefore not been influenced by competition between the contractors. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly common for purchasers to try to move away from traditional cost pricing and instead find ways of real market pricing to stimulate product development. However, this development may be hampered by the unfamiliarity, inability, or unwillingness of the forestry sector to use the tendering procedure.[3]

Previous research has shown that a main reason for entrepreneurs to accept outsourcing was to have more control over their working life. Comparisons between northern and southern Swedish forestry could shed new light on their conditions, as the markets have had crucial differences. Did workers' conditions differ between regions, and will low margins for contractors and fragmented responsibility threaten the sustainability of forestry in the future? It is necessary to examine and compare the industry at a regional level to explain the market failures described above.

The authors

Thomas Pettersson is an Associate Professor (docent) of economic history and a senior lecturer at the Unit of Economic History, Umeå University. His research covers path dependency processes in the Swedish and Scandinavian transport sector and transformation processes in the northern forest industry.

Fredrik Olsson Spjut holds a PhD in Economic History and is a Senior Lecturer at the Unit of Economic History, Umeå University. His research interests include regional economic history, energy, and educational history of Swedish ironworks.

Endnotes

1 Pettersson, Ronny (2015): Sågad skog för välstånd. Den svenska sågverksindustrins historia 1850 – 2010, Kungl. Skogs-och Lantbruksakademien.

2 Kronholm, Thomas, Larsson, Ida & Erlandsson, Emanuel (2021): "Characterization of forestry contractors' business models and profitability in Northern Sweden", Scandinavian Journal of Forest Research, 36:6, 491–501.

3 Malin Johansson, Emanuel Erlandsson, Thomas Kronholm & Ola Lindroos (2021): "Key drivers and obstacles for performance among forest harvesting service contractors – a qualitative case study from Sweden", Scandinavian Journal of Forest Research, 36:7–8, 598–613.

Practical aspects of the green transition in the Swedish forest industry: a scientific reflection on workforce preparedness

Evans Korang Adjei
Centre for Regional Science (Cerum), Umeå University

The collective efforts to keep global temperatures below 2 degrees Celsius through net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 is in full operation, with Sweden being a key player. The Swedish Forest sector has been active in this course by continually improving forest management, producing fossil-free and renewable products, and by acting as a world leader in many areas of sustainable forest research.

The objective to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 will require actions that will affect industrial production, consumption patterns, and energy provision, and trigger uneven industrial transformations[1]. This is a phenomenon we can describe as a global challenge with local implications.

It is evident that the structural changes and transformations that will emanate from the green transition will have significant implications for different industries and local labour markets. According to the OECD, the greening of the labour market will have three main effects: it will lead to the loss of some existing jobs, especially jobs that are not environmentally friendly; but will also result in the emergence of new types of jobs, creating economic opportunities in occupations that may not yet exist. Finally, the green transition will lead to a shift in the skills that are required for many jobs[2].

The phenomena of job creation and destruction are caused by economic, social, environmental, and even policy shocks. Connected to these events are mobility/migration decisions, which are not made in isolation but after considering various opportunities. In this regard, the aggressive implementation of green transition policies across industries will inadvertently destroy some jobs (render some skills and capabilities 'useless') and create new jobs (trigger the need to acquire new skills and capabilities). However, the forest industry must position itself to create new jobs, attract new 'green' skills, while simultaneously embedding itself in local industrial and occupational landscapes to avoid being 'left behind'.

The Swedish Forest Industry Federation has pledged to support the green transi-

tion agenda by increasing climate benefits by 30%, ensuring all wood-based products from its members are fossil-free and recyclable, and by having forests rich in biodiversity by 2040[3].

This pledge will require new capabilities and knowledge within the forest and forest-based industries. In a study accessing the relatedness and embeddedness of the forest industry in relation to other industries in the local economy[4], Adjei and Eriksson found that the forest industry in Västernorrland county represents an isolated industry, which implies that the competencies and skill sets of the forest industry are primarily industry-specific. In other words, although the forest industry contributes strongly to domestic economic values, the activities are relatively peripheral in term of the competencies the forest industry shares with other industries in the local economy. Västernorrland is not an isolated case[5].

This lack of wider regional industrial embeddedness means that while the forest industry may be strongly related to other industries within forest and forest-based industry, it is weakly connected to other industries outside forest and forest-based industry, and it has implications, among other things, for access to regional resources like future skill supply and demand in the region and the possibility of regional diversification. The lack of embeddedness of the forest industry could also affect its ability to collaborate on common green-transition–related labour issues with other industries.

It is important to note that the risks and opportunities of green transition and labour market effects are uneven across industries and regions, even within the same the country; hence, achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions will require policy changes that affect more than just business owners. For example, policies must address international labour migration and education and training. Policy changes in international labour migration must also attract qualified green-skilled labour.

Likewise, policy changes in education and training must aim to provide forest workers with the 'green' skills that will enhance the interrelationship between the forest sector and other sectors. There is a need to collaborate and improve links with other sectors in education and training. Second, there is a greater possibility of new green jobs in the forest industry or of existing jobs changing in composition or description. This will mean upskilling existing labour (basic, vocation, or professional education) in the forest industry, at least to meet short-term anticipated labour demands – 'green' jobs should increase the demand for existing skills and occupations. Third, the forest and forest-based industry must position itself to attract diverse groups of labour (especially those with green and technological skills), including equitable occupational distribution for men and women. All in all, a just and fair transition is an important aspect of the green transition.

Finally, forest and forest-based industries stand the chance of generating more employment opportunities in the forest value chain in both rural and urban regions in low and high skills jobs as a multiplier effect of the job destruction in other sectors of the local economy.

The author

Evans Korang Adjei is a Staff Scientist at the Centre for Regional Science, Cerum, Umeå University. He has worked on several research projects like investigating the level of micro- urbanization in northern Sweden and analyzing the effects of immigration and labor market outcomes of low educated native workers. He has published several articles related to the regional dimensions of entrepreneurship and large industrial investments.

Endnotes

1 OECD (2023A): Regional industrial transitions to climate neutrality, OECD regional development studies, OECD Publishing.

2 OECD (2023B): Job creation and local economic development 2023: Bridging the great green divide. OECD Publishing.

3 Swedish Forest Industries (2023): 2040: Swedish forest industries' road to the future. Swedish Forest Industries.

4 Adjei, E.K. & Eriksson, R. (2019). Skogen som resurs in Region Västernorrland: Näringslivsanalys 2002–2015. CERUM Rapport, Umeå Universitet.

5 Explore industrial and occupational opportunity spaces in Sweden here: https://os-sweden.rec-group.se/

2

Berry picking and seasonal laborers

‘Green dreams’ and cheap labour: A note on Thai wild berry pickers

Charlotta Hedberg
Department of Geography, Umeå University

Every summer thousands of berry pickers enter Swedish forests to pick wild berries. 25,000 tons of berries are collected, the vast majority of them picked by Thai berry pickers.[1] The problems attached to this migration system are related to instable and difficult working conditions and low and insecure wages, which has been analysed in terms of precarious work[2], a product of global capitalist structures,[3] and as forced labour.[4] Consequently, in 2024, a berry entrepreneur in Åsele was – for the first time – brought to court and convicted at the District Court for “exploitation of labour”, a judgement that at the time of writing has been appealed at the Court of Appeal.

I have been researching the berry industry for 15 years. Together with my research team, we have performed participant observation and interviews with most actors in the chain – berry pickers, berry entrepreneurs, the processing industry, local and national authorities, and staffing agencies. When it comes to understanding the system, the main focus has been on the Swedish side, whereas the understanding of Thai workers has been based on the studies performed in Thailand, both in order to understand the context of where they are coming from, and since they are in a situation less dependent on employers in their home environment compared to working abroad in Sweden.

Thai berry pickers are often middle-aged family men who work as rice farmers in rural north-eastern Thailand. The area is one of the poorest areas in the country, and the prospects of earning a living as a traditional farmer have decreased over the last few decades[5]. Instead, farmers are searching for alternative incomes, where picking berries in Sweden for a short season (about 90 days) often is seen as an attractive alternative to the two-year contract work that others in the region are performing. The timing for work in Sweden is optimal, occurring at a time of low intensity in Thai agriculture. The workers are seasonal and circular migrants, who travel repeatedly between Sweden and Thailand. This behaviour has contributed to a question that I often get regarding Thai berry pickers: why are berry pickers travelling continually to Sweden, year after year, despite the precarious nature of the work? To unpack this answer, we should first take a quick look at the aspirations of the individual worker,

and then zoom out to the structures of the berry industry.

The workers carry with them 'green dreams' of improving their lives. It is a dream of picking themselves and their families out of poor and simple living conditions, towards current and future possibilities to improve their livelihoods. Some workers succeed, while others fail. Travelling around villages in the district, we encountered what can be termed an 'ambiguity' towards berry picking. On the one hand, there are the positive rumours of top pickers who have earned a fortune, their improved houses that one can see with one's own eyes, and the possibility of changing the lives of one's family members. On the other hand, there are disappointed workers, who returned with low or no income, and memories of hard work. Both sides are found in Thai villages, but of course, one generally tends to speak more often about success than about failure. And if you had failed, you were more than willing to try your luck again, next season. A strong tradition is formed in villages and households for berry picking, based on a solid belief that "I am able to work hard".

And they do work hard. The most obvious impression from fieldwork in Sweden among Thai berry-pickers is related to competition for the best spots for picking, and a wish to earn as much as possible, which makes the workers get up exceptionally early and retire from work late in the day. When weighing the berries in late evening, the expression of exhaustion on their faces has remained in my memory, bearing witness to exceptionally hard work conditions. To this is added the insecurity of payment – how much will they earn? While on paper they are allowed basic salary according to Swedish collective agreements, most of them think only of the piecework salary that the companies have promised them: pick as much as you can to get the highest earnings. Only, the truth is that Swedish buyers adjust payment downwards over the season, to keep their revenues up. This means that even though single workers become "top pickers", earning hundreds of thousands of Thai Bhat, the vast majority of workers will never earn more than basic salaries, regardless of how hard they work. The industry will make sure not to harm their business model.

So, then, what is the business model of the industry? Simply put, the idea of the berry industry is to make a profit from a natural resource that they can get for free (due to the Right of Public Access), through the use of cheap labour. The thousands of tons of berries that are picked are then frozen and sold for further processing in other segments of the market. In order to keep labour cheap, the industry has used all ideas they can think of: importing workers from across the globe, circumventing Swedish regulations and taxes by employing workers abroad, placing unexpected costs on the workers, and using piecework salary. It is therefore not far-fetched to say that the business idea is neighbouring on exploitation of labour. The case which

is currently being processed in Åsele in 2024 is accordingly no exception; rather, precarity is built into the system. The accusations from the prosecutor illustrate problems that most berry pickers have faced or are currently facing.

So, if the business idea of the current industry is cheap labour, which is automatically akin to worker exploitation, what we need is a radically transformed wild berry industry. In our current research project, we are sketching how this could take form. First, berries produced in Sweden should be accorded a higher value; for instance by processing into high-value products such as wine or medicine. Second, however, this is not enough to protect workers. Based on our current knowledge of labour conditions in the wild berry industry, social responsibility of workers would need to be placed in the front row of a new business model. This industry could, for instance, be based on workers who are employed in Sweden, hired through cooperative solutions in Thailand, and hired under improved, stabilised work conditions.

The author

Charlotta Hedberg is professor in Human Geography at Umeå University and a migration researcher. Her research during the last ten years has primarily focussed on Thai migrant workers from a transnational perspective, from the perspective of the migration industry and from the perspective of the wild berry industry.

Endnotes

1 Andersson, J and Hedberg C (2021): Bärometer 2021, Uppsala University and Umeå University.

2 Hedberg, C (2022): Precarity and migration: Thai wild berry pickers in Sweden. In: Faces of precarity: critical perspectives on work, subjectivities and struggles / [ed] Joseph Choonara; Annalisa Murgia; Renato Miguel Carmo, Bristol University Press. Pp 180–194.

3 Eriksson, M and Tollefsen, A (2018): The production of the rural landscape and its labour: The development of supply chain capitalism in the Swedish berry industry, Bulletin of Geography, 40(40): 68–81.

4 Mesic, N and Wikström, E (2021): "Ruptures and acts of citizenship in the Swedish berry-picking industry", Journal of Rural Studies 88: 518–526; Vogiazides, L and Hedberg, C (2013): Trafficking for Forced Labour and Labour Exploitation in Sweden: Examples from the restaurant and the berry industries. Exploitation of Migrant Workers in Finland, Sweden, Estonia and Lithuania: Uncovering the links between recruitment, irregular employment practices and labour trafficking. HEUNI Publication Series.

5 Buch-Hansen, M. (2001): "Is Sustainable Agriculture in Thailand Feasible?" Journal of Sustainable Agriculture, 18(2–3): 137–160.

Berries and borders: the regulatory shifts and workforce realities of Sweden's migrant berry-picking labour

Anudini Wijayarathna
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), Uppsala

The Swedish wild berry industry depends on two main categories of seasonal migrant labour from non-European Union countries – primarily south-east Asia and eastern European countries, both within and outside the EU – and they harvest wild berries in Swedish forests under Sweden's 'allemansrätten'[1] law. Thai berry pickers, the largest non-EU group of berry pickers, are employed by Swedish companies, whereas eastern European pickers, like those from Bulgaria and Ukraine, work as 'free/tourist pickers' and are not employed by Swedish companies. Tourist pickers migrate to Sweden seasonally on tourist visas and sell harvested berries independently to berry companies or purchasers.

The Swedish wild berry industry has seen significant shifts over the past three decades driven by global market demand and the availability of cheap labour. Until 2008, both non-EU and tourist pickers harvested berries under unregulated conditions, often on tourist visas. In response to scandals involving non-EU migrant berry pickers, Swedish Migration Agency introduced regulations in 2008 requiring work visas and contracts guaranteeing minimum wage for non-EU pickers. Under these regulations, non-EU pickers receive their contracted salary even if they harvest less than the defined quantity value, with additional pay per kilo for surplus berries. However, tourist pickers still enter on tourist visas and are paid per kilo of harvested berries. Meanwhile, Thai workers have emerged as the dominant labour force in this industry.

In autumn 2020, new tax regulations were introduced affecting both non-EU and tourist berry pickers. Accordingly, Sweden's central government imposed "SINK[2]" tax policy on non-EU pickers, requiring them to pay a 25% income tax in Sweden instead of in their home countries. They can reduce this tax by claiming Swedish ordinary income tax deductions for travel and accommodation if 90% of their annual income is from berry picking. On the other hand, tourist pickers are taxed if their income exceeds SEK 12,500.

While these regulatory changes theoretically provide non-EU pickers with more job

security and the opportunity to earn more than the contracted salary, the narratives behind these changes reveal a different story. Thai pickers work up to 12 hours a day for 3 months in remote Swedish forests, facing unpredictable challenges such as health issues, unfavourable weather conditions, and fluctuating prices per kilo, which can reduce their earnings. Thai pickers who are mostly rural farmers use their berry-picking earnings to improve their living standards; expanding homes, buying vehicles, and funding children's education. Nevertheless, their actual take-home pay is often reduced, as they repay the loans taken out to cover the costs of travel and living in Sweden. Moreover, despite tax reforms offering Thai pickers the option to claim Swedish ordinary income tax deductions, their actual take-home pay often does not amount to 90% of their annual income, making this option rarely practical.

For tourist pickers, conditions are even worse. They rely entirely on the fluctuating prices per kilo for berries, making their earnings more uncertain than those of Thai pickers. They endure long and costly travel routes to reach Sweden mostly arranged through intermediaries, and often face exploitative conditions in Sweden, such as human trafficking, forced sex work, poor accommodation, and false promises regarding access to berry-picking areas. In such situations, they also resort to alternative means of survival, such as fishing, taking on other jobs, or engaging in theft.

The two different ways in which non-EU and tourist berry-picking labour operate have created a complex landscape within Sweden's seasonal migrant berry-picking sector. While regulations have been designed to improve labour conditions, in practice they do not address the deeper structural vulnerabilities that allow precarious of Thai berry-picking labour. The seasonal migrant berry-picking sector remains fragmented, with tourist pickers operating outside the regulated labour system. In reality, tourist pickers are deeply interwoven into the Swedish wild berry industry, yet they largely remain invisible. Thus, these groups reflect two forms of precariousness: Thai pickers often suffer systemic exploitation, while tourist pickers face marginalisation and overlooked exploitation.

Addressing these pressing issues in seasonal migrant berry-picking labour requires a more holistic approach with a robust, inclusive policy framework that recognises both groups of berry pickers who keep the Swedish wild berry industry afloat.

The author

Anudini Wijayarathna is a Communications Consultant in the field of social innovation development in higher education. Her research interests include livelihoods and workforce dynamics. For her Master's thesis, she conducted an interdisciplinary qualitative study titled 'Along the Paths of Berry Pickers: Ascertaining the Roles and Positions of Seasonal Migrant Berry Pickers in Sweden through Swedish Media.

References

Augère-Granier, M.L. (2021): Migrant seasonal workers in the European agricultural sector, European Parliament.

Olsson, P. H. (2018): The Case of the Thai Berry Pickers: Towards Protection of Vulnerable Towards Protection of Vulnerable, Amsterdam University Press, pp. 149–168.

Rehbinder, C. (2020): Ruttna bär och ruttna villkor. Timbro.

Schneider, J. o.a. (2020): Are agri-food workers only exploited in Southern Europe? Case studies on migrant labour in Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, u.o., Open Society Foundations.

Wingborg, M. (2019): "Allt hårdare villkor för thailändska bärplockare". 1 September, Dagens Arena.

Wingborg, M. (2021): "När covid-19 kom till skogen", 22 August, Dagens Arena.

Wijayarathna, A. (2022): Along the paths of berry pickers: Ascertaining the roles and positions of seasonal migrant berry pickers in Sweden through Swedish media (master's thesis 2022), Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Urban and Rural Development.

Endnotes

1 Allemansrätten: Swedish general public's right to access most of the public or privately owned land

2 SINK (Särskild inkomstskatt för utomlands bosatta): Special income tax for residents living abroad

Exploitation in the green dream: seasonal labour migration in the Swedish forest sector

Irma Olofsson
Department of Geography, Umeå University

In the presentation of the forest as a key part of the ongoing green transformation in the time of automation and AI, the forest as a site of production still holds some crucial manual jobs, such as planting and thinning with a chainsaw. Until recently, tree-planting has been a common job for young people in rural areas and other places close to the forest. Living in northern Sweden, it is not uncommon for older generations to tell you about their summer job as a tree-planter or how tree-planting was how most of their friends spent their summers. Manual work in the forest is physically demanding, with low pay, and in Sweden it can only be done when there is no snow. Today, the majority of manual work in the forest industry is being done by migrant workers who come to Sweden seasonally. Migrant workers in the green industry face exploitative working and living conditions around the world, and there are no indications in research or official reports that Sweden is likely to deviate from this pattern. This essay is based on my doctoral thesis,[1] and will focus on highlighting the situation of migrant workers doing seasonal work in the Swedish forestry sector and why workers' living and asks working conditions is a challenge for the forest sector, especially in their quest to be part of the sustainable transition.

Migrant workers have become an essential part of the Swedish forestry industry. The estimations of how much of the manual work in the forests are being done by migrant workers range from 70%–95%.[2] Due to workers coming from both inside and outside of the EU, it is impossible to know exactly how many come to Sweden each year to do work in the forest. In relation to these estimations there is a general agreement among stakeholders ranging from trade unions to employers that the Swedish forestry sector would not be able to keep up with production if it were not for the hiring of migrant workers.[3] This also became apparent in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Swedish state first decided to close the borders for temporary workers, but soon after made an exemption for seasonal workers within green industries, classifying them as societally important.[4] The change came after

both public demands and communications between representatives from multiple green industries to the then current government, stressing the importance of exempting berry-pickers, agricultural workers, and forestry workers.

Migrant workers are part of a disempowered segment of the labour market and are caught in the nexus of labour market regulation and migration legislations. One of the ways this is actualised within the forest sector is through sub-ordinated inclusion. [5] In short, 'sub-ordinated inclusion' refers to migrant workers officially being included into various worker and/or citizens' rights but lacking the possibility of exercising these rights. Everyone working in Sweden is covered by legislation concerning working hours, and there are collective bargaining agreements; but at the same time violations of working hour limits and disputes about pay are common.

Migrant workers tend to refrain from reporting violations due to fear of losing their job and possibly their right to be in Sweden, or they unaware of how Swedish regulation works. A trade union representative describes that it is easy for employers to make everything look correct while circumventing regulation and that this is done foremost at the expense of the workers. Additionally, this also creates unfair competition with employers who follow regulations. The trade union representative also added that neither they nor other representatives had ever seen a pay slip from a migrant worker that contained a sick day, something they are entitled to. In 2020, the national audit office criticised the state for not doing enough to protect migrant workers, including implementing existing regulation[6].

The shift from local labour power to temporary migrant workers needs to be understood as part of a larger shift within the Swedish labour market as well as within migration policies towards an increasingly neoliberal organisation of the political economy. In 2009, Sweden introduced a highly de-regulated labour migration legislation designed around employer demand. At the same time, there are time- and space-specific aspects to how this unfolds within the Swedish forestry sector. A characteristic of the forestry industry, along with the other green industries, is their dependency on specific natural and geographic conditions, which also impact the almost exclusive rural context in which they are located. The Swedish forestry area is vast, and the areas surrounding productive forests are rural and often sparsely populated. This creates not only physical distance for workers, but also a relational distance to the rural setting and to the forest, with imaginaries of rural areas that do not align with their realities as sites of production where migrant workers face exploitation. It is this distance that contributes to the development of exploitative conditions.

A dependency on low-wage and highly exploitable migrant labour within an industry is an issue in and of itself, but it is especially at odds with ambitions from

both the forest industry and the Swedish state about forestry industry's role in a sustainable transition. Social sustainability, along with the right to decent work, is part of many international agreements that Sweden has ratified, such as the Paris accord. Any sustainable transition for people and for the planet needs to also be socially sustainable and include working life and workers' rights, including the lives and rights of non-Swedish citizens. To reach those goals, the forest industry and Sweden has a long road ahead of them.

The author

Irma Olofsson, PhD in Human Geography, and has done research about labour migration to Sweden's green industries. Her research interest lies within labour geography and recently also labour issues related to the sustainable transition. She defended her thesis in early 2024.

Endnotes

1 Olofsson, I. (2024): *Invisible yet essential : the role of seasonal labour migration in Sweden's green industries*, Umeå university..

2 Ibid.

3 Olofsson, I., Tollefsen, A. and Hedberg, C. (2023): '"A strong mind and a solid physique": Symbolic Constructions of Migrant Workers in Sweden's Green Industries', 13(2).

4 Olofsson, I. (2024): *Invisible yet essential : the role of seasonal labour migration in Sweden's green industries*, Umeå university.

5 Tollefsen, A., Hedberg, C., Eriksson, M., and Axelsson, L. (2020): 'Changing labor standards and "subordinated inclusion": Thai migrant workers in the Swedish forest berry industry', in J.F. Rye and K. O'Reilly (eds) *International Labour Migration to Europe's Rural Regions:* Routledge, pp. 121–138.

6 Olofsson, I. (2024): *Invisible yet essential : the role of seasonal labour migration in Sweden's green industries*, Umeå university.

3

Organizations of the workforce

Occupational health and safety management among Swedish forestry contractors: a contemporary analysis

Thomas Kronholm & Carola Häggström
Department of Forest Biomaterials and Technology, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Umeå, Sweden

Forestry is one of Sweden's most essential industries, shaping not only the landscape but also serving as the economic backbone of rural communities. Within this sector, forestry contractors – mostly small businesses – play a crucial role by carrying out essential tasks like logging and forest management. However, the industry has long been known for its tough working conditions and low profits. Unfortunately, it is also a dangerous line of work. Accidents are common, with high rates of injuries and even fatalities, and many incidents go unreported, especially the less severe accidents, which do not warrant official notification to regulatory authorities. Common accidents in forestry include falls, collisions, and injuries caused by tools, machinery, or other objects. On top of that, workers are at risk of developing long-term health problems due to exposure to vibrations, poor ergonomics, excessive noise, and harsh weather conditions.

Over the years, various interventions have been implemented to improve occupational health and safety (OSH) within the forestry sector. In addition to general legal requirements governing business operations, industry-specific certification standards have increasingly imposed stringent demands on forestry contractors' OSH management practices. While these heightened requirements can lead to increased costs for contractors – such as investments in staff facilities, new machinery, or training – such expenditures can be particularly challenging for companies already under financial strain. However, some studies suggest that investments in a safe and healthy working environment may have positive economic impacts, such as reducing costly production interruptions, lowering insurance premiums, and decreasing staff turnover. If this turns out to be true for Swedish forestry contractors, it could encourage them to invest more in safety measures, thereby prioritising safety as a critical component of their business operations.

To better understand the link between safety practices and profitability, a survey was conducted in 2023. It targeted 1200 randomly selected forestry companies that provide silvicultural or logging services. The companies were divided into three

groups based on how profitable they were – low, medium, and high profitability – to see whether there were any patterns between safety practices and profitability.

The survey was anonymous, and 267 companies responded, with 242 valid responses used in the final analysis. Researchers then applied various statistical methods to explore potential connections between safety practices and financial outcomes.

The findings revealed that larger contractors, as determined by turnover, were more likely to have formalised OSH management practices in place. These companies often had written guidelines for risky tasks, performed regular safety inspections, and maintained updated action plans for addressing safety issues. Overall, bigger companies tended to comply with safety regulations more consistently. Local factors, such as variations in weather and climate, also played a role in shaping safety practices. For instance, contractors located in northern Sweden, where harsher climatic conditions prevail, were more likely to provide on-site staff facilities.

Interestingly, the study did not establish a clear connection between contractors' profitability and their OSH management practices. One notable result was that the most profitable contractors were less likely to offer on-site staff facilities compared to the less profitable ones, though this difference was only statistically significant in comparison to medium-profitability companies.

However, there was a strong link between what contractors believed about the financial benefits of good safety management and their actions. Those who believed that good OSH management positively influenced their financial performance were more likely to invest in employee competence development, regularly inform staff about existing procedures and protocols, and utilise more up-to-date equipment. Conversely, companies that perceived their financial situation as precarious were less likely to ensure that employees had safely returned home after completing solitary work.

This study highlights a critical need to enhance OSH management practices among Swedish forestry contractors, particularly to ensure compliance with existing regulations. The insights gained from this research contribute to a broader understanding of the underlying reasons for the forestry industry's high accident rate and guide future efforts to provide information and training to contractors. Further research is necessary to explore why some companies struggle with regulatory compliance and how best to support them in creating safer working environments.

The authors

Dr. Thomas Kronholm is a researcher whose focus is on business issues linked to forestry contractors and family forest owners, such as business models, working conditions, attitudes, organization, and more.

Dr. Carola Häggström is a researcher the Department of Forest Biomaterials and Technology, SLU and is active within occupational science, focusing on the role of humans in changing forestry.

“When it’s so light up here it is not uncommon to see people working in the forest until 10–11 at night” – perspectives on working conditions in Swedish forestry

Irma Olofsson
Department of Geography, Umeå University

Every year around 400 million fir and spruce trees are put into the ground all around the boreal forests of Sweden. The continuous re-planting of trees is part of the foundation behind why wood is considered a renewable resource. From a production viewpoint, the planting of new trees is both a condition for continuous production as well as the first step in many different and long commodity chains. Tree-planting is still done manually from June to August in Sweden, with a break often occurring in July. The seasonally- and physically demanding aspects of the work create certain challenges when it comes to finding people who are willing to carry out the work.

Currently, and for the last few decades, the solution has been to find labour outside of Sweden —the large majority of people planting trees in Swedish forests are migrant workers. In a report based on surveys with 10 large employers published in 2019, around 3% came from Sweden, followed by Poland (34%), and, in descending order, Romania, Ukraine, and Lithuania[1]. In 2019, a trade union representative estimated there were around 4000–5000 people working seasonally in Swedish forestry, and a slightly lower estimate of around 3000 was given by the Farmers association in April 2020 in their bid to get Sweden to include seasonal workers under the category of ‘essential workers’[2].

This is described by the employer federation for the forest sector along with large forest owning companies as well as some employers as a positive development for the industry, as migrant workers are necessary for Swedish forestry to function. Hiring migrant workers is portrayed as a win-win situation; solving recruitment issues for Swedish companies and allowing migrant workers to “make a lot of money”.[3]
The essential role that migrant workers now fill in Swedish forestry is reoccurring

in interviews with trade unions representing forestry workers in Sweden, but the portrayal of the development as being an all-around win-win situation is being challenged. Critics portray a system where rules and regulations are easily circumvented, with the migrant worker almost always drawing the short end of the stick. These circumventions often concern wages and working hours.

> *I have had cases where the time report says Monday to Friday and 8 hours a day, but then the worker will show me a photo on their phones "here are we planting on a Saturday" and another one "here are we working one of multiple evenings." (trade unionist, autumn 2021)*

Long working hours and long weeks are one of the most common ways of circumvention, which in itself can be a violation of Swedish legislation, but this also connects to circumvention regarding workers' wages. Tree-planters are allowed to work on a piece-rate, but with a guaranteed minimum hourly wage. That minimum wage is based on a regular work week with an 8-hour workday. If the total earned through piece-rate during a day reaches the minimum wage for an 8-hour workday, but the workday was actually 10 or maybe even 12 hours, the hourly wage will be much lower.

> *They are not informed that they have the right to a minimum wage per hour […] piece-rate is allowed but it cannot be less than 115 SEK an hour and needs to be in accordance with Swedish working time law […] but the workers only get information about the piece-rate. (trade unionist, winter 2019)*

The work takes place in peripheral places and presents the trade unions with physical obstacles when it comes to getting in contact with workers, but the distance for the worker to contact the Swedish trade union is more than just physical, as expressed in the following quote:

> *Nine out of 10 do not want it to be known that they are members […] are you here from Romania then everyone in your work-team is from the same village as you and if you contact a union you could be risking the job of the whole village…if it were me I would feel scared about it. (trade unionist, autumn 2021)*

While these are some of the examples of how regulations are circumvented, it is important to understand these are indications of the structural functions of labour migration. Often in low-wage work in high-wage countries, labour migration is used to keep labour costs down. And individuals working long days or not knowing about or having an ability to exercise their rights is part of how this happens.

Endnotes

1 Forsmark, V. and Johannesson, T. (2019): *Skogsvårdsföretagens rekrytering*. Uppsala.

2 Kuns, B., Börjeson, L., Fischer, K., Hedberg, C., Olofsson, I., Ovaska, U., & Vihinen, H. (2023): From panic to business as usual: What coronavirus has revealed about migrant labour, agri-food systems and industrial relations in the Nordic countries. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 63(4), 907-927.

3 Olofsson, I. (2024): *Invisible yet essential : the role of seasonal labour migration in Sweden's green industries*. Umeå university.

Kronan Master: a network for established regeneration and tending contractors

Lotta Woxblom & Bodel Norrby
The Forestry Research Institute of Sweden

Today's forestry contractors operate in a relatively young branch of the forestry industry, with most of the companies established in the 2000s. The sector provides afforestation and cleaning services and is characterised by seasonal work. Over time, it has become increasingly challenging to recruit and retain staff with the skills and stamina needed for these demanding tasks.

Sustainable forestry aims to create raw materials for industry and a positive net income for forest owners, as well as favourable conditions for species-rich and well-grown forests.

The Swedish forestry sector has undergone major changes over the last twenty years, both in terms of how the work is organised and in the composition of the workforce. The majority of forestry work is outsourced to specialised forestry companies; today there are almost 900 registered companies in this field of activity. The workforce consists almost exclusively of foreign nationals, and as competition for labour in Europe has increased, many contractors have found it increasingly difficult to recruit staff with the skills needed to carry out forestry work.

Regeneration and tending company managers, unlike logging contractors, are usually not 'skilled former performers', many have a more pronounced entrepreneurial profile with a past in other industries. This difference between logging and silviculture managers can probably be explained by the fact that recruitment and personnel management are more prominent in a silviculture company, which implies a different type of management; and managers rarely or never perform operational work.

We, some colleagues working with organisational development in forestry at Skogforsk, got the idea of creating a meeting arena for leaders of well-established forestry companies willing to develop. The concept, which over time has developed into an entrepreneurial network, is built up of short independent modules whose content is governed by the needs and wishes of the participants.
The basic idea is that Skogforsk offers an arena in which contractors can exchange

experiences and reflect together with colleagues in similar situations, and at the same time get inspiration for leadership development and news from the research front. The meetings are a mix of lectures and interactive exercises based on issues in the participants' own everyday lives as forestry contractors.

The first meeting was held in autumn 2018, and so far we have had a total of five meetings in which people from about ten companies participated in each meeting.

The expectation highest on the list was the opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas on issues relevant to the companies themselves, as well as to get something from outside. At the meetings, we have alternated own efforts—such as analysing the industry's business environment —with guests who have contributed experiences from entrepreneurship both within and outside the forestry industry. The agenda has also included organisation and leadership, how to address the media, and what applies to assignment agreements.

After a few sessions, participants were ready to invite their customers into a conversation in this arena. One of the entrepreneurs put it this way:

> *I think we are all so mature now as a group, that we would gain a lot by bringing in the clients [...] and including them in these industry-wide thoughts [...]. A meeting with all the big clients in a circle would be a really good idea in my world.*

Forestry managers from four of the major players in Swedish forestry—Sveaskog, Holmen Skog, Mellanskog and Stora Enso—were invited to offer the network their view of the situation in Swedish forestry. This fifth meeting of the network was characterised by great openness and a willingness to work together—clients, contractors and Skogforsk—to address the challenges facing the industry. We can see that there is a consensus as to what key issues are, which is hopeful. Ahead of the sixth meeting, which will take place in autumn 2024, we have invited forestry managers from four more of the major customer companies. We look forward to another meeting full of lively dialogue, where forestry managers themselves will have more space to describe their perspectives.

Having organised, facilitated, and participated in these network meetings, we feel that the power of meeting in a neutral arena fulfils an important function; inviting and creating forums for dialogue – without always having scientific facts to rely on as answers to difficult challenges –is an underused tool for development. The impact may be difficult to measure in monetary terms, but we are convinced that the efforts

create benefits throughout the chain – both in monetary and interpersonal terms.

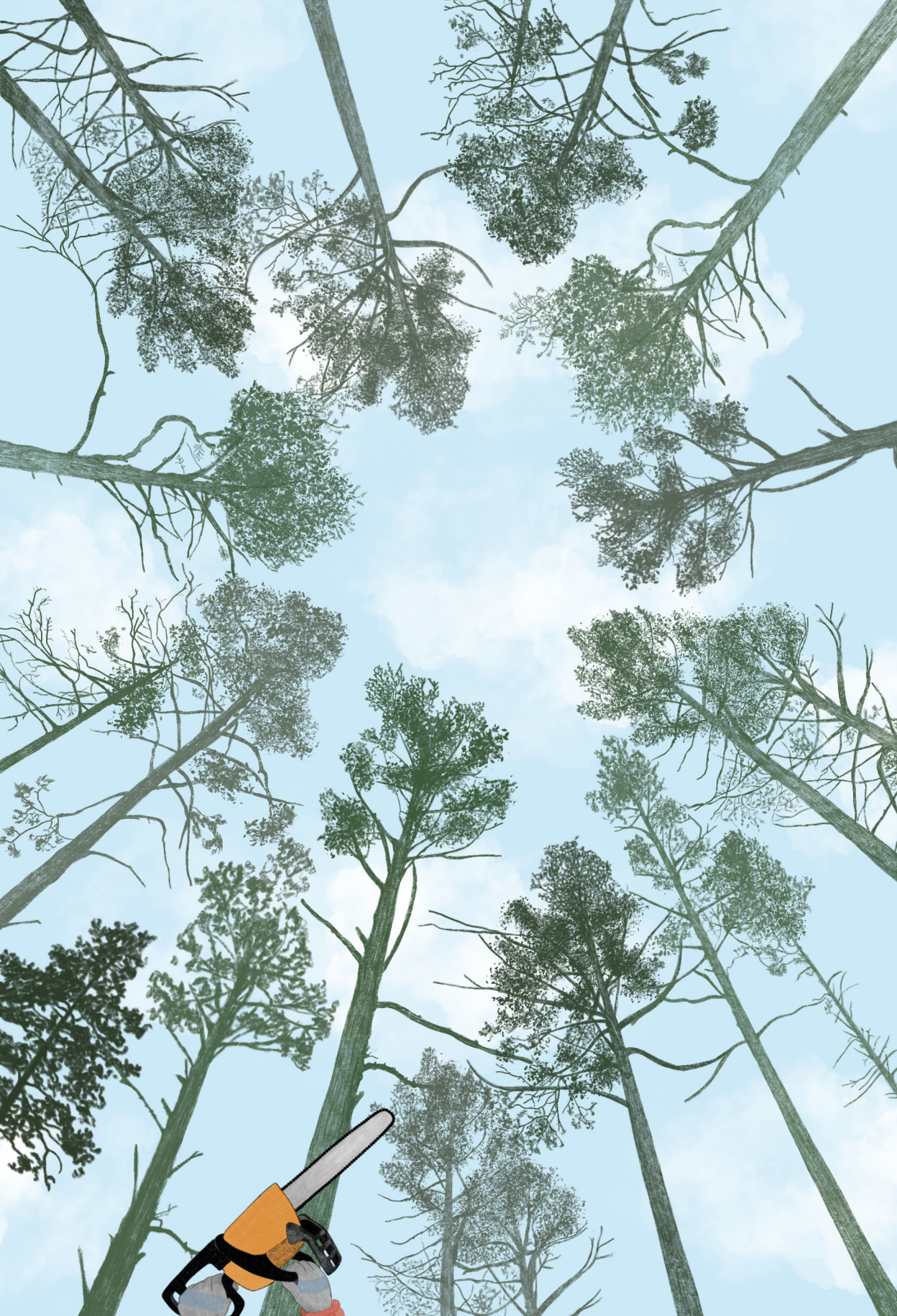
The format of annual meetings in the Kronan Master network has proven to work well. To illustrate this, we end the text with a quote from one of the participants:

> *There were some concerns about meeting competitors, but we have become colleagues and friends. We have many common issues and if we help each other, the whole value chain improves. I think it has been very rewarding to be involved.*

The authors:

Lotta Woxblom, MSc in Forestry, has a PhD Forest-Industry-Market Studies and is senior researcher at the Forestry Research Institute of Sweden. She is part of the team working with organizational development in forestry. The group has a particular focus on collaboration and business relationships between forestry contractor companies and their clients, as well as the attractiveness of the industry.

Bodel Norrby, MSc in Forestry and has a diploma in organization and leadership. At the Forestry Research Institute of Sweden, she is part of the team working with organisational development in forestry. The group has a particular focus on collaboration and business relationships between forestry contractor companies and their clients, as well as the attractiveness of the industry.



4

Hierarchies and diversity in the forest workforce

Green diverse promises and greyish realities: gendered forest labour, professions, and relationships in the light of change

Elias Andersson
Southern Swedish Forest Research Centre

Swedish forestry and forest industries are, and have historically been, dominated by men and particular forms of masculinity. These are dominated by blue-collar and rural-based nature-mastering masculinities, with their roots in practical and symbolic associations of manual forestry work. The introduction of new technologies, changing forest owners' demographics and new marketing and managerial ideas and strategies have emphasised and negotiated the relevance of new and varied competences and skillsets. In this development, gender equality has been articulated by policy-makers and company representatives, with a focus on increasing the representation of women as a means of modernising the sector and making it more attractive, competitive, and diverse.

These articulations have produced specific openings, positions, and expectations for, and of, women, which also adds to the vertical, horizontal, and internal segregation of the forestry sector.[1] The functional and physical separation can be seen in women more often working outside of traditional forestry areas, while men are often located closer to, and associated more closely with, the core values of the organisations. This spatial segregation embodies and enforces sexual violence, often on the basis of organisational structures and practices that reproduce inequalities and gendered meaning-making and experiences of forestry and forest ownership.

Over the last decade, the promises of renewable climate mitigation and a bio-based economy for forest policy and industries has been based on particular articulations and opportunities of the global climate crisis. This has driven specific adaptions, mitigations, implications, and conflicts of and between individual industries and society. For forestry organisations, this poses new social and epistemic challenges and pushes organisational practices, production, and identities in various ways. Foresters, with similar educational backgrounds, constitute the professional backbone of the sector. They work in various parts, functions, and roles of the forest industry and their work and work identities are, in various ways, often closely interrelated with forest indus-

tries, its organisations, and their organisational practices, logics, and relationships.[2]

In practice, these roles and functions are central to the management of forests both owned by industry and by private individuals/families. In the latter case, regarding the role as timber purchaser and/or forest advisor, almost nine out of ten timber purchasers are men. The traditional role of foresters as experts is reproduced through the performance and articulation of expert knowledge, professionalism, values, and symbols to impose leverage and control of both internal and external relationships and conflicts. Internally, the production and regulation of specific forms of forester masculinities – often with strong focus on flexibility and autonomy – also plays a crucial role in organisational and managerial control. Through gendered structures, meaning-making and work identities, dominant organisational values and socio-ecological conceptions of spatial separation and binary relationships (e.g., forest versus office) are performed. This contributes to upholding the timber/pulp hegemony and the imbalance between values, such as production/economic, and environmental/social.

Therefore, gendered forestry work identities and organisation, with its segregation, inequalities, and dominant forms of masculinities bear the risks – in the process of change – of greater isolation and vulnerability, path dependency, and of blocking organisational resources and knowledge vital for a green transition. The present focus on promoting gender equality manifests in modes of deliberation leading to a replacement, rather than a disruption, of masculine norms and values.[3] Similarly, without paying attention to gender, work identities, and work organisations, the risk is high that environmental challenges become 'just another' issue, something that is dealt with somewhere else, away from everyday life and with a limited effect on production.

This highlights how shades of green are not determined by the promises of the green economy, but on socio-ecological and organisational realities and relationships. Moving beyond shades of grey is dependent on the ability of research and industry to both tackle ecological and social crisis and inequalities and to transcend binary categorisations and structuring of everyday life. As a basis for change, the integration of more social and pluralistic approaches to forest sciences which, e.g., links the social and the epistemic aspects of forestry professionals, only plays one part. Knowledge of integration, implementation, and organisational and institutional change, as well as critical approaches to co-creation and modes of deliberation that (un)mask domination and inequalities, plays another part. Still, knowledge will only take us so far.

The author

Elias Andersson, associate professor in forest policy at the Department of Southern Forest Research Centre, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. His research focus is mainly on gender, gender equality, work and organization within a forest-related contexts.

Endnotes

1 Johansson K, Andersson E, Johansson M, et al. (2020): Conditioned openings and restraints: The meaning-making of women professionals breaking into the male-dominated sector of forestry. Gender, Work & Organization 27(6), pp. 927–943.

2 Andersson E and Keskitalo ECH (2018): Adaptation to climate change? Why business-as-usual remains the logical choice in Swedish forestry. Global Environmental Change 48(1), pp. 76–85.

3 Johansson K, Andersson E and Johansson M (2022): Restructuring masculinities and reshaping inequalities: Negotiations of (gendered) sales work and relations in an industrial organization. Gender, Work & Organization 29(4), pp. 1008–1024.

Symbolic machine work and entrepreneurial management skills: work ideals in the gender performances of forest-owning Swedish women

Emmeline Laszlo Ambjörnsson
Department of Human Geography at Uppsala University, Campus Gotland

Work is much more than the concrete act of work. Work also entails multiple ideas, or ideals, of society and the social relationships within in it. In this chapter, I will discuss how ideals of forestry work are an integral part of the gender performances of forest-owning Swedish women (i.e., how they do gender) through which they become recognised (by themselves and by others) as legitimate subjects in forestry. The text is based on my previously published qualitative research (interviews, participant observation, and text analysis) focused on the gender performances of Swedish forest owners organised in women-only forestry networks.[1]

Several scholars have shown how Swedish forestry is dominated by men, masculinity, and patriarchal power relations.[2] Women in the sector are often excluded and allocated to subordinate positions in multiple ways, both discursively and materially.[3] Knowledge of forestry and skills related to forestry work are highly gendered and central to this exclusion.[4] However, as a result of the increasing number of women becoming forest owners without having been socialised into forestry and/or being excluded from mainstream male-dominated forestry organisations, there were several women-only forestry networks established in Sweden during the 1990s and early 2000s. The need for female forest owners to increase their forestry knowledge and skills in forestry work was an important reason for starting these networks.[5]

Within the networks, educational activities – focused on both theoretical knowledge and practical skills related to forestry – were central. In my study of the networks, two contrasting gendered ideals of being, and working as, a forest owner were evident; the 'tough forest owner' and the 'entrepreneurial forest owner'. Both of these constructs were connected to normative masculinities in forestry, and women used

these masculine traits and associated practices in their gender performances to resist subordination in forestry and to be acknowledged as legitimate forest owners.[6]

The ideal of the 'tough forest owner' was built on a rural blue-collar masculinity involving physical labour, and the use of machines such chainsaws and brush cutters. For many of the women in my study, the use of such machinery and the labour skills required were central to becoming a legitimate forest owner. Within the women-only networks, chainsaw courses were very popular and women who were skilled in machine work were admired and seen as role models. Nevertheless (much like the forest owner collective in general), many of my interviewees did not carry out operational work themselves, at least not to a large extent. The machine work they engaged in was rather symbolic and granted them the status of legitimate forest owners. Learning masculine-coded labour skills should therefore be understood as a way of resisting the subordinated position assigned to women in forestry.

However, some of the women in the study also resisted the subordinate position of women and femininity in forestry by deliberately not engaging with masculine-coded machine work, arguing that there should be other ways of being a forest owner (than adapting to the ways of men and normative masculinity). These masculine-coded labour skills were thus both used in processes of resistance and resisted altogether.

In contrast to the 'tough forest owner', the ideal of the 'entrepreneurial forest owner' built on an urban white-collar middle-class masculinity. Instead of practical skills such as operating a chainsaw, emphasis was placed on the entrepreneurial side of running your forest property as a business. This included market knowledge and managerial skills, including the knowledge required to procure forestry labour services. This ideal was also mainly connected to a certain kind of masculine-coded entrepreneurship, oriented towards conventional forestry and timber production. The entrepreneurial ideal was reflected in the many business-oriented activities in the women-only networks, and many female forest owners drew on this ideal in their gender performances. However, there were also tensions in regard to the entrepreneurial ideal, where many women in the study also emphasised feminine-coded aspects of their entrepreneurship like diversification opportunities or alternatives to large-scale timber production, such as forest-based delicacies and production of wood fibre design products.

Although I have presented these gendered work ideals as contrasting, they often overlapped in the sense that individual women in my study drew on both to varying

degrees in the construction of the forest owner identity. The way the women made use of masculine-coded traits and work practices (or resisted them), and drew on alternative feminine-coded ways of conducting work in forestry in their identity constructions, partly challenged patriarchal power relations in forestry by considering them to be legitimate forest owners. However, drawing on masculine-coded traits and practices also strengthened the position of masculinities in relation to femininities, and thus also reinforced the status quo of patriarchal relationships in forestry.[7]

The ideals guiding work practices are important to understand. In this case, the gendered work ideals reproduced in the women-only networks are connected to gendered work ideals in the wider setting of forestry, and such gendered ideals have implications for forestry work in a variety of ways. These may include how forestry workers are seen, who will take interest in pursuing a career in the field, who feels a sense of belonging when they are in it, and ultimately, what kind of forestry and forests the sector's work will produce.

The author

Emmeline Laszlo Ambjörnsson is a PhD and an Associate Senior Lecturer in human geography at the Department of Human Geography at Uppsala University, Campus Gotland. She is interested in transdisciplinary and social science research on sustainability, natural resource management, governance, planning and policy, especially in relation to gender and intersectional power relations.

Endnotes

1 Laszlo Ambjörnsson, Emmeline (2021): "Performing female masculinities and negotiating femininities: challenging gender hegemonies in Swedish forestry through women's networks", Gender, Place and Culture 28, no. 11, 1584–1605.

2 E.g., Johansson, Kristina, Andersson, Elias, Johansson, Maria & Lidestav, Gun (2020): "Conditioned Openings and Restraints: The Meaning-Making of Women Professionals Breaking into the Male-Dominated Sector of Forestry", Gender, Work & Organization 27, 1–17.

3 E.g., Johansson, Maria, Johansson, Kristina, & Andersson, Elias (2018): "#Metoo in the Swedish Forest Sector: Testimonies from Harassed Women on Sexualised Forms of Male Control", Scandinavian Journal of Forest Research 33, no. 5, 419–425.

4 E.g., Lidestav, Gun & Ekström, Magnus (2000): "Introducing Gender in Studies on Management Behaviour among Non-Industrial Private Forest Owners", Scandinavian Journal of Forest Research 15, no. 3, 378–386.

5 Laszlo Ambjörnsson, Emmeline (2021): "Performing female masculinities and negotiating femininities", 1584–1605.

6 Ibid.

Forestry: an attractive industry of the future?

Petra Ek, Anders Mörk & Lotta Woxblom
The Forest Research Instiutet of Sweden

Issues pertaining to the attractiveness of the forestry sector and its ability to recruit new employees to meet demand have been raised and discussed with varying intensity over the years. The shortage of labour in the industry is noticeable in several occupational groups: among machine operators, forestry workers, as well as among timber buyers, advisors, production managers, and planners. Alarm reports of impending retirements, contractors leaving the industry, and forestry schools struggling to attract students have appeared at different intervals. In parallel, the cost of recruiting new operators, particularly machine operators, has been a constant topic of discussion.

Over time, the forest industry has undergone major rationalisation, which has resulted in the almost complete disappearance of staff who were previously a link in everyday life between practical work in the forest and officials in the office. The number of officials with previous experience of practical work in the field has decreased over the same period and many now come directly from higher education into these roles. In many contexts, the problem of a lack of expertise in practical matters in the field is raised and this can be linked to the attractiveness of the sector.

Skogforsk[1] administers a number of collaboration groups with different foci. One of these, the Collaboration Group for Contract Forestry – ESG, focuses on issues relating to forestry contracting services, and the participants meet to jointly identify, discuss, and work on urgent development projects in this area. The group consists of around ten contractors (planting/cleaning contractors and logging contractors and an equal number of officials working in companies that buy services from the contractors. Within ESG, there are a number of working groups that work actively on different issues. One group, called The Attractive Industry group works on issues relating to skills supply in forestry. At the time of writing, their focus is on the need for machine operators and how to help encourage primary school students to take an interest in the forestry industry.

Over the years, the working group has initiated several of master theses projects. One of these aimed to shed light on how well the skills of students who have recently graduated from forestry university programmes in Sweden match the need for

skills in three common entry-level occupations in the forest industry: timber buyer, production manager, and planner. The study, entitled Competence building within the forestry industry[2] , interviewed former students from the Master of Forestry and Master of Forestry programmes at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and the Bachelor of Forestry and Bachelor of Science in Forestry and Wood Technology programme at Linnaeus University, who had worked between one and five years after graduation. In addition, people in different roles and with longer professional experience in both companies and forest owner organisations were interviewed. Recent graduates emphasised the importance of forestry skills as a basis for their professional practice. Business skills and communication skills were important factors emphasised by both categories of respondents. The results also show that there are some differences in terms of what graduates expect from different professional roles and what it is like to work as a timber buyer; for example, in practice. Among the opportunities for improvement identified, more niche training options and the integration of practical applications into training programmes were mentioned. The study also highlighted the need to develop a common view among employees and management in the forest industry regarding the definition of different professional roles and the skills required for these, but also developed dialogue and collaboration between academia and the forest industry.

In 2021, a bachelor thesis project was carried out on behalf of ESG. The work, Recruitment of machine operators from agricultural gymnasium,[3] is based on the fact that there are too few forestry machine operators and that they rarely remain in the profession for more than a few years. The study investigated how many of those who studied at the forestry training programmes of the agricultural upper secondary schools work as forest machine operators, and why those who leave choose to leave the industry. One reason why machine operators choose to leave the profession is a combination of the low level of wages and poor working conditions as of high workloads and shift work. The operators who continue in the profession state that factors such as the freedom to influence their own working hours and the confidence of the employer to work independently contribute to their decision to stay.

Forestry companies are also making efforts to increase the attractiveness of the sector. One example of this is SCA, which recently launched its own post-secondary vocational training programme. The aim is to attract more people to train as forest machine operators, and the programme is aimed at people with a few years' professional experience from other industries who are interested in changing career paths. The programme does not require any previous experience of operating machinery or knowledge of forestry, and participants are selected through interviews. Skogforsk's

Attractive Industry working group will follow how this training programme develops and its participants over time to study the outcome of the initiative.

We believe in the Swedish forest industry as an industry of the future, but the various professional roles in the industry need to be made visible to the general public. A good example of 'marketing a lesser-known activity' is the hauling industry, which has become better known through the TV series Svenska Truckers. This has resulted, among other things, in new groups choosing to become professional drivers and in training places now being filled. Perhaps this—making a similar effort to make some of the forestry professions more visible—could prove valuable for Sweden's forestry industry.

There are many indications that forest management itself will change. New management models and how much more of Sweden's productive forest should be set aside for nature conservation are topics discussed daily. We believe that one of the industry's strengths is that it can match the three pillars of sustainability—economic, environmental, and social values—and that there will continue to be a demand for forest resources in the future. To be able to utilise these in the best possible way requires the right skills, and, above all, an interest in the forest industry as a workplace.

The authors:

Petra Ek, BSc in Forest Management, is project leader at the Forestry Research Institute of Sweden. She is part of the team working with organizational development in forestry with focus on collaboration and business relationships between forestry contractor companies and their clients, as well as the attractiveness of the industry.

Anders Mörk, forest technician and method instructor for forest machine operators. At the Forestry Research Institute of Sweden, he is part of the team working with organisational development in forestry. The group has a particular focus on collaboration and business relationships between forestry contractor companies and their clients, as well as the attractiveness of the industry.

Lotta Woxblom, MSc in Forestry, has a PhD Forest-Industry-Market Studies and is senior researcher at the Forestry Research Institute of Sweden. She is part of the team working with organizational development in forestry. The group has a particular focus on collaboration and business relationships between forestry contractor companies and their clients, as well as the attractiveness of the industry.

Endnotes

1 Skogforsk—Forestry Research Institute (www.skogforsk.se)

2 Andersson, H.W. (2018): Competence building within the forestry industry – a study of the matching of newly graduated students competence and the expectations of the forestry industry. master thesis, Forest and Wood Technology, Linnaeus University.

3 Ek, P. & Skotte, A. (2021): Recruitment of machine operators from agricultural gymnasium, bachelor thesis, in forestry 2021:10, SLU-Skogsmästarskolan.

In this anthology, initiated by the Future Forests platform, we aim to shine a light on the people working within the Swedish forest sector and industry. Researchers from a wide range of fields and institutions contribute insights on history, migrant labor, working conditions, and the future of the Swedish forestry, discussing aspects of what is needed for creating a sustainable bioeconomy for all.

Future Forest is an interdisciplinary platform for research and communication, organised by Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Umeå University and Skogforsk.

SLU Future Forests skogforsk UMEÅ UNIVERSITET