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## 4 A Genealogy of Urban Forest Discourse in Flanders

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### Introduction

This chapter is about the “career” of an emerging discourse within spatial planning in Flanders (an autonomous region in northern Belgium), specifically the need to create an urban forest near to every city and town. The claim is remarkable given the absence of any tradition in Flanders of woodland creation near urban areas. Urban forests have since long been popular recreational assets elsewhere in Europe, most notably in cities of Eastern and Central Europe (Konijnendijk, 2003). In Flanders, by contrast, the concept was almost unknown until the 1990s. Nevertheless, since then, the idea has come to motivate an ever-widening circle of public sector actors and environmental groups. As a result, urban forest projects are shooting up across Flanders.

Starting from this initial observation and informed by Foucauldian genealogy, this chapter aims to explicate how urban forest discourse gained prominence in current land-use debates. According to Foucault (1972: 54), discourses are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Thus, discourse is not just about ideas and concepts, as represented in speech and text, discourse is also actively “practiced”. The purpose of discourse analysis is to reveal how the words we use to conceptualize and communicate end up producing the very things or objects of which we speak (Graham, 2011). A genealogical approach to discourse analysis traces the development and constitutive or political effects of discourses over time while also showing the possibilities that are excluded. Strategies that permit control over discourse have a major role to play in triggering these effects. These activities include, for example, using appealing storylines to capture policy attention and mobilize policy action (Van Herzele, 2006). But equally important, controlling and channelizing the discourse also implies discursive strategies of exclusion, for instance, discrediting alternative interpretations (Winkel, 2012).

In what follows, it is first shown how a particular discourse of forest expansion—and a variant of it focusing specifically on urban forest creation—has its roots in a long-lasting political struggle for attention and power by a small forestry sector group. For this group, the stakes were related to the position of forests within spatial politics as well as the identity of the forester as a professional. Next, the case of a park forest project near Ghent, Belgium, illustrates what can happen when a forest-centred discourse comes to interfere with local understandings and politics and,

more broadly, a city-centred discourse of planning professionals. The data for the case study were obtained for the period 1997 to 2007 from various documentary sources, including official policy texts, commissioned reports, opinion pieces in magazines, press releases, public reactions in meetings and on the internet, 100 recorded interviews in the field, and also confidential material, such as minutes from meetings, and the exchange of letters between politicians, officials, and others (Van Herzele, 2006; Buizer and Van Herzele, 2012). The chapter ends with some recent developments (up to 2013) and a brief reflection on the changes in discourse and strategy that have occurred since the research was first conducted.

### **First Struggles for Political Attention**

Whereas policy discourse on the creation of urban forests became evident in the 1990s, it is rooted in the wider political debate on forestry dating back to the early 1970s. At that time, forest policy was a nationally regulated matter. Those concerned with the forest observed that forests in Flanders were increasingly under the threat of urbanization and its effects. They accused the state of not doing enough to protect the forest and in some instances even taking an active role in forest-destructive projects (as an initiator or at least a favourable party in political bargaining with developers). Another issue of complaint was the apparent imbalance in political attention. Resources for forestry were mainly directed to the Walloon part of Belgium, where almost all of the state-owned forests were located. The national forestry administration was even spoken of as “a French-speaking bastion”.

In 1970, a handful of progressive foresters—dismayed with the unfavourable forest situation in Flanders—founded the “Flemish Forestry Association” (FFA). Its aims were presented as three key messages: forest preservation, forest expansion, and multi-functionality. In this context, a first storyline for forest expansion was launched (Van Miegroet, 1971). The story started with the history of deforestation in Flanders since 1846 and contrasted it with the afforestation policy in Wallonia over the same period. And, as is typical for policy stories, it then made the move from diagnosis to prescription for action: it was claimed that Flanders should be reforested to the level it was in 1846.

Meanwhile, FFA members took every opportunity to alert the politicians to their cause. They widely promoted the forest with campaigns, such as tree-plantings and “the week of the forest”, which were all covered extensively by the media. Much was achieved during the 1970s and 1980s. The strong demand for regionalization of forestry matters gradually turned into reality: a Flemish forest administration was established, the need to open up the state forests for recreation was accepted, and increased budgets were set aside for forest acquisition and recreational equipment. The concept of multi-functional forestry was secured as a basic principle in the new Forest Decree of 1990. It can be concluded that a small circle of foresters had actually succeeded in attracting political attention and initiating some important changes in established institutional rules.

The term “small” is significant here. Successes were based largely on the charisma of individuals and their relations with those in key political and administrative

decision-making positions, as well as in the media. This was a weak foundation for a more broadly and substantially based support. The FFA was unable to raise its number of members above a few hundred and its image remained one of a “tribe of experts”.

In the same period, ecologists (and other nature defenders) began to set themselves up as leaders of the nature conservation movement. The need to protect endangered species and natural habitats received much political attention. Institutionalization followed rapidly with a (framework) law on nature conservation (1973), and later on, the establishment of a separate administration for nature (1980) and the institute of nature conservation (1985). But the division of forest and nature institutions also fuelled controversy. Specifically, it positioned foresters and ecologists at opposite ends to one another in an arena of competition. Also, their discourses on what “nature” is about and what it should look like appeared to be largely incompatible. The nature concept of conservationists—strongly influenced by Dutch examples—was primarily directed at open types of vegetation and less to woodland. Their views were perceived as hostile, both to the forests and the foresters. Moreover, the fact that their message quickly came to attract great political attention became a new source of frustration to foresters. The design of the “Main Green Structure Plan” for Flanders (early 1990s) is one striking example. Both the perceived lack of appreciation of forestry and nature conservationists’ claims for authority led to great indignation on the part of foresters. But what has constrained forest discourse from gaining a wider appeal? In the next section closer attention is paid to the concepts and ideas central to the professional forest discourse.

### **Close-to-Nature Forestry and Multi-Functionality**

At Ghent University a particular “close-to-nature forestry” model was promoted, as traditionally applied in Switzerland, Germany, and Slovenia. The basic idea is to use the natural processes in primeval forests as a prime source of inspiration. Accomplishing “ecological stability” is the ultimate goal (Figure 4.1). This model favoured an idealized image, representing the forest as a vast area under permanent tree cover, with closed canopy and trees of various ages, in a mature (or “climax”) stage of development, closed-off from external disturbances, and importantly, under the professional control of the forester.

For a long time, the tree-oriented and managerial vision suppressed alternative visions introduced by scientists outside the forestry sector, most notably the creation of habitats (e.g. gradients in forest edges and gaps) supporting species of conservation concern. Forestry scientists continued to marginalize such biodiversity-oriented approaches for being “entirely artificial” and unable to meet the wider societal demands, such as forest recreation and wood consumption (Lust, 1980). And what is more, “the forester” was presented as the only professional qualified for the forest-management task. For example: “Under no circumstances, forest management may be consigned to persons who have a one-sided approach to the forest, who are not familiar with the forestry methods and who do not know



Figure 4.1 “The close-to-nature forestry” concept—influential in discourse on forest expansion—uses natural processes in primeval forests as a prime source of inspiration.

Source: Ann Van Herzele.

the international forestry world” (Van Miegroet in FFA’s newsletter, July 1989). By positioning their own professionalism at the centre, the circle of those taking part in the discourse became extremely limited. The exclusionary effect was truly felt by ecologists, for instance (personal communication, 2004): “In those times, in order to be allowed to put in a word about the forest, one had to be an agricultural engineer in forestry studies and preferably a graduate of Ghent University too.”

Another concept in forestry science—which later became strategically crucial—is multi-functionality. Whereas the idea was basically inspired by the concept of “multiple-use silviculture” developed in the US, it was particularly the narrowly production-oriented forest policy after the World Wars that had fuelled a counter-discourse as a consequence, giving greater prominence to environmental and social aspects of forestry. The broadening view was also in line with the increasing demand for outdoor recreation. Until that time, the majority of the forests (including those publicly owned) were not accessible to the general public. However, the emerging ideas of “social forestry” led to ambivalent feelings among state foresters. On the one hand, the philosophy of care and respect—also related to the close-to-nature forest concept, representing the forest as a “living entity” and “complex ecosystem”—appeared difficult to reconcile with recreation. Forest

recreation was spoken of as something “unavoidable” and efforts should go to “guiding away visitors” and “damage limitation”. On the other hand, it was acknowledged that the concept of multi-functionality held potential for improving the forestry sector’s position in the political arena. The concept was not only helpful in drawing attention to the importance of forests, it also provided the basis of an influential storyline for forest expansion and, later on, its “urban” variant.

### Creating an Urban Forest Storyline

The integration of different land uses in the planning of open space in Flanders was the theme of a Green Space Strategy conference (1988). The timing of this platform for discussion was crucial, as it coincided with the preparation of significant changes in the planning system. The forestry sector advocated that the forest should be considered as a distinctive planning entity. As it was at the time, forests were divided into various planning zones, such as nature protection, recreation, and more. It was argued that planning was completely ignoring the intrinsic multi-functionality of the forest. In the foresters’ view, the forest should be perceived as a physical entity with spatial impact, out of which a range of potential functions automatically follow (Dua, 1988). Thus, they were primarily concerned with valorizing the intrinsic multi-functionality of the forest itself, rather than encouraging the multifunctional use of open space in general.

The forest-based concept of multi-functionality also formed the cornerstone of the forestry sector’s demand for forest expansion. A “forest expansion” group was formed with active FFA members. They assembled an appealing story line, beginning with the “fact” of the extremely low forest cover in Flanders, compared with several other European countries. This fact was put in contradiction to the exceptional importance of forests as they fulfil a multiplicity of functions, all of which are beneficial to society for several reasons. This led to the evident observation that as a result of the low forest cover these beneficial functions can only be fulfilled to a limited extent. The story then made the normative leap from facts to recommendations, indicating that in order to fulfil all these functions the forest cover should be expanded by 50 per cent by 2050 (1,000 hectares every year) (Muys et al., 1988). The strength of the storyline was not so much in the plausibility of facts and assumptions. It was the particular framing of multi-functionality in relation to space that created a representation of the forest as a norm on its own terms and, subsequently, forest expansion as the most logical decision.

Throughout the 1990s this storyline was used continuously to advance the cause of forest expansion, a prime example being the Long-term Forestry Plan (launched by the forest administration in 1993). On this occasion, the storyline was placed within the emerging sustainability discourse following the UN Earth Summit, 1992. Specifically, the Flemish forest situation was linked to industrial countries’ responsibility for the decline of the world’s forest cover. However, what is most critical here is that a forest expansion programme was outlined in maps of Flanders showing the priority areas for afforestation from a variety of functions. From this first “spatial translation” of discourse it became evident that afforestation near

urban areas would sustain many forest functions and thus produce the most societal gain. Subsequently, the term urban or city forest was introduced and fitted perfectly within the existing forest-expansion storyline. However, apart from the precondition of a vast surface area—a minimum of 100 and preferably 500 hectares—the concept was not defined specifically. Despite its legal base (the 1990 Forest Decree), the Long-term Forestry Plan was never formally approved. Nevertheless, the urban forest idea became increasingly used. Later on, the sector's spatial vision of forest expansion was elaborated further in the 1996 "Desired Forest Structure for Flanders".

### **Institutionalization of Forest Expansion Discourse**

The demand for forest expansion was actively pursued in the run-up to the Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (SSP), whose aim was to provide a clear strategy and a frame of reference for future spatial development. Thanks to its prior visioning work, the forestry sector positioned itself as a well-prepared and convincing partner in the negotiation process. As a result, a forest expansion target of 10,000 hectares was inscribed in the formally approved SSP (1997). It stipulated that forest expansion should be principally linked up with existing forests in function of nature development or in the vicinity of urban areas (for instance, peri-urban forests in sparsely forested areas). The Flemish government was given the task of designating the areas for forest expansion in the regional land use plans (RUPs).

Whereas the claim for forest expansion was now formalized and translated into one of the SSP's binding provisions, this had more to do with the quantification of hectares than with the discourse in its entirety. The SSP focused on creating one coherent, structuring framework consisting of river valleys and well-connected areas of open space. The structure-based discourse implied that coherence and connection were the norms for open spaces rather than particular land uses. Furthermore, a largely nature sector-led view was followed which placed forests in different spatial categories such as "large units of nature" and "nature connection areas". This still left the forestry sector with great uncertainty. It was felt that the principle of multi-functionality was once again denied. It was feared, moreover, that both spatial and nature policies were going to deprive them of their competences (Vanhaeren in FFAs newsletter, January 1997). However, apart from that, the SSP was acknowledged as the starting point of serious attention being given to address the forest expansion issue. As a regulatory document, it also helped spread the urban forest concept throughout Flanders and even take root in local politics.

The subsequent establishment of a Forest Expansion Unit was another important step in the institutionalization of the forest expansion discourse. From the beginning it focused on the urban environment, "where the forest combines most of its functions" (Vitse in "Eigentijds", March 2001). It was its ambition to provide each city and town in Flanders with a forest. A three-step strategy was developed: (1) Location: where should the urban forest be located? (2) Concept: what should the urban forest look like? (3) Implementation: how should the urban forest be realized? It was expected that local politicians would more likely accept the urban

forest idea if it was presented gradually. It was decided therefore to keep the first two steps of decision-making out of wider social debate, so as to enable "common interests" (i.e. urban forest creation) to prevail over the "personal interests" of local residents (Nachtergaele et al., 2002). Thus, the attribution of interests was another exclusionary strategy to anticipate and negate public criticism.

### **Reversing the Storyline**

Meanwhile, the FFA and the spatial planning department at Ghent University were commissioned to undertake a pilot location study for creating a 300-hectare city forest near Ghent. This yielded an interesting combination of forest and planning discourse, also reflected in the study's report (Van Elegem et al., 1997). The text starts telling a structure-based "open space storyline", pointing to the loss of coherence and connection of open spaces under pressure of urbanization. It then continues with the urban forest storyline, framing the problem of forest shortage as the incapacity of the existing forests to provide the desired multi-functionality. Urban forest creation was legitimized further as it followed from both "scientific inquiry" (the Long-term Forestry Plan) and "societal consensus" (the SSP). Remarkably, the line of the story changed direction completely when it came to action. The city's, and not the forest's, multi-functionality was now the starting point (including the problems related to it, e.g. urban liveability). Urban greenspace—such as the city forest—was presented as elements that make up the urban image and structure. It was recommended that when creating new greenspace one should search for existing urban structures and "create proximity and connection" to them. In this way, a more pleasant living environment for urban dwellers could be created. So, the city forest was presented more as a possible means or solution than an end in itself. And, the urban-centred view urged to look from the city to the forest rather than the other way around (Van Herzele and van Woerkum, 2011). Reversing the storyline also implied that the forest was no longer acknowledged as a distinct entity, let alone a privileged one, and that other kinds of greenspaces might be part of the "solution". The study's engagement with searching for a forest location, however, did not allow such a conclusion.

In this case, the planners' concern with creating interconnected open-space structures was nicely reconciled with the foresters' desired image of a large entity, which would ensure the multi-functionality of the forest and its professional management. Hence, the 300-hectare "budget" was to be spent in order to achieve one unbroken forest unit. Furthermore, the study fostered a "city forest profile" that was a close copy of the close-to-nature forest image. For instance, rapid development of a "real forest climate" was to be enabled through planting fast-growing tree species. The forest-centred view also had great implications for the way in which acceptable usages were defined: "The target group mainly consists of urban dwellers searching for quietness and enjoying natural beauty. Active recreation should be avoided, yet, the creation of a limited space for play forest within the urban forest concept is within the bounds of possibility" (Van Elegem et al., 1997).

Multi-criteria analysis was used to test possible locations for their structure-strengthening, recreational, and ecological potential. Finally, a feasibility test was performed to deal with the acceptability of the suitable locations for other land-use sectors (agriculture, nature conservation, industry, etc.), which all were considered “competing categories”. However, apart from proposing two best locations, no definitive choice was made and the results were still open for discussion.

### Selling the Forest to Local Politicians

It became rapidly clear that the city forest was not an image that could easily be “sold” locally. The municipal government of Lovendegem was quick to oppose turning agricultural land into forest. Hence, further efforts in lobbying concentrated on the other location. This area—called Kastelensite—obtained a high ranking mainly because of its potential to keep separate the residential development of the city of Ghent and the municipality of De Pinte. However, politicians in De Pinte expressed fear that the forest would attract swarms of urban people. The city forest also evoked a strong connotation with “the city”, of which local residents did not want to become a part. But that concern was counteracted in part by the argument that the forest could put up a barrier to the city (FFA personal communication, 2004). In a formal statement (March 1999), the city of Ghent declared its readiness for collaboration, but it also criticized the location study because it lacked any consideration of “how the forest project would be integrated into the present cultural landscape with its valuable landscape elements”. Also in the newspapers there was much talk of “destroying the beautiful meadows” and “chasing away the farmers”.

Nevertheless, the concept of a “massive forest core” (being a “true city forest”) continued to be used in promoting the project (FFA press release, July 2000). In 1999, an EU-funded Life Environment project was started with the prime objective to create a firm societal support base for the “City Forest Ghent” (De Vreese et al., 2004). The project initiators (Flemish forest administration, province of East-Flanders, FFA) formed the “Bossanova” alliance to actively promote the city forest to the public and the local politicians. But despite intensive lobbying, the politicians remained reluctant. For example, during an election debate (September 2000) the Ghent deputy mayor of environment stated: “Just to be perfectly clear: city forests are not necessarily forests!” He opposed the idea of “building up” the area with trees, which would destroy its distinct character. In the same period, the Spatial Structure Plan for Ghent was in the making. The planners took the need for forest creation into account, but they started from a structure-based vision emphasizing the coherence and connection of open spaces (i.e. the open space storyline). The enhancement of the urban quality of life was a major concern. In this context, the concept of the four “groenpolen” (large multifunctional greenspaces in the urban periphery) was formed, as a main part of the city’s green structure. The Kastelensite was included as one of these areas.

After the elections (October 2000), the new political coalition of Ghent declared its commitment to the realization of the four “groenpolen” in its governmental agreement (2001–2006). Although they aimed to create new forests in these locations, this was not the case in the Kastelensite, for which the “preservation of the present landscape values” was among the main action points. The local nature movement, the Minister of Environment, and the FFA reacted with disappointment, arguing that the location had been selected through scientific investigation and departmental budgets were already in place.

### Changing the Forest’s Image

Increasingly aware of the importance attached to the present landscape, Bossanova decided to change the name of the project from “City Forest Ghent” to “Park Forest Ghent” (December 2000). It was also realized that a more “consumer”-oriented view (focusing on scenic and recreational values) was necessary for promoting the forest more widely. This also implied a shift from avoiding active

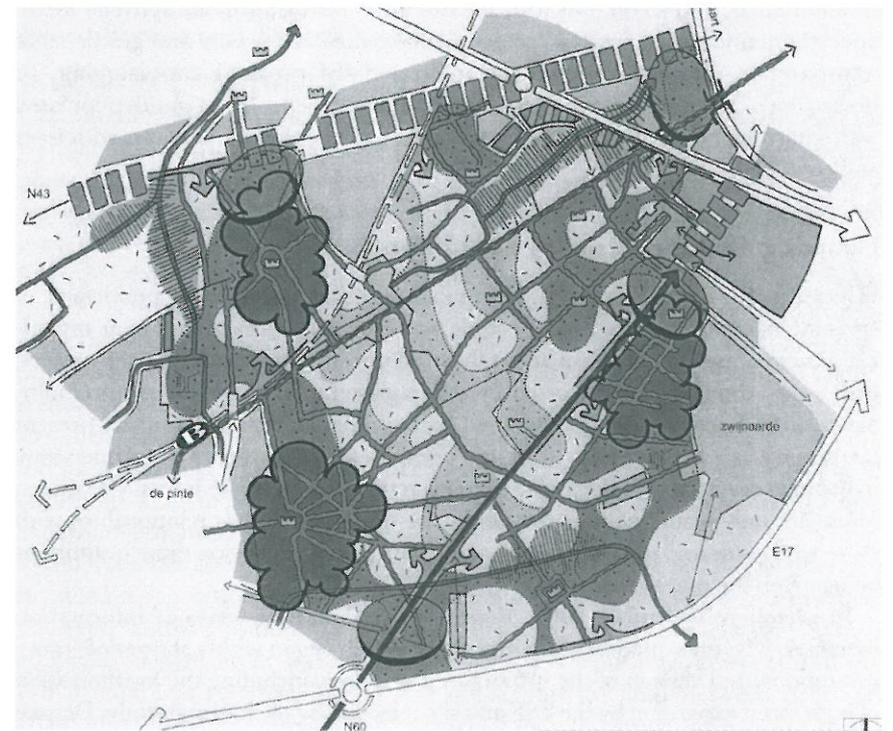


Figure 4.2 The forest image was changed from one massive entity to an open concept of interacting land uses.

Source: Preparatory study for the RUP in 2001.

forms of recreation to actually promoting them. For instance, an article promoting the project made a new point when speaking of horse and mountain bike trails along and through the forest (Embo in the province's environmental magazine, November 1999).

In January 2001 the project was integrated in the planning process for the RUP. In this context, the extended area of Kastelensite-Scheldevelde was to become a "city landscape park": a multifunctional area of 1,200 hectares with a dominantly open-space character and including about 300 hectares of new afforestation. The process was coordinated and led by the regional Spatial Planning Division and was followed by a steering group consisting of representatives of various regional administrations, as well as the three municipalities involved.

The joint discussions led to a thorough revision of the initial plan: splitting up the forest into several units, ranging from three "core forests" to numerous small forest patches spread over the area. Thus, the urban forest concept was fundamentally changed, that is, from a massive single entity to a more open concept of interacting land uses. In the preparatory study for the RUP in September 2001, the new urban forest concept was presented in a structural sketch—showing a mixture of areas, including different types of forest, sustainable agriculture, habitat creation areas, and so on, but with smooth and fluent transitions between them. Special attention was given to scenic qualities, such as borders and gradients of transparency. The new image also infiltrated the project's campaigning. In Bossanova's Park Forest magazine, photographs with dense forest stands populated with squirrels and woodpeckers were replaced with pictures of meadows with trees and cows.

### Growing Concern among Local People

While the RUP study brought the public administrations and politicians to agreement, concern among local people was growing. Farmers and their organizations continued to complain about the legal uncertainties caused by the project, which they thought would worsen by the fragmentation of the forest into multiple entities. Local residents welcomed recreational equipment, but the present landscape was a sensitive issue to them. Personal letters to Bossanova and interviews in the field revealed that they wanted to keep the landscape like it was. Creating a forest not only would change the landscape but also people's relationships with those who made and still maintain it, and create a dependency on those institutions being given the management task.

In October–November 2002, Bossanova organized a series of information meetings. The presentation of the structural sketch began with a shortened, more institutionalized version of the urban forest storyline, including the legitimization of both forest expansion by the SSF and site selection by the location study. Despite the detailed information given during these sessions, the farmers and local residents continued to question the very idea: Why is the forest being planned here? Is there a need for forest at all? Clearly, the logic of reshaping the open landscape into a forest was not fully understood. The residents were also concerned about the



Figure 4.3 Farmers' protest against the Park Forest project: "Where may I graze now?"

Source: photo by Griet Buysse.

practical implications: safety, property rights, privacy, tidiness, etc. However, their worries were often denied as too personal or less relevant or as something to be handled by the RUP's formal public consultation procedure.

### From Structural Sketch to Land Use Plan

Early in 2002, the Flemish Land Agency became involved in the project. Consultations with individual landowners/farmers were held, in particular, for translating the structural sketch of the RUP into a detailed, parcel-wise land use plan. As a result, the agreed-on Park Forest concept was transformed into a segregated landscape with demarcated strips and parcels of land for singular land uses. For reasons of legal certainty, farmers wanted agricultural land use to be interpreted in its strict sense, implying that elements like "field forests" and "edge forests" were rejected. Thus, due to legally established procedures and farmers' expectations about them, the new urban forest concept was reduced to a juxtaposition of strictly delineated land uses. Remarkably, however, the initial afforestation target in terms of hectares of land remained largely untouched. The so-called "balance" was restored to a great extent by enlarging two of the core forests, resulting in a total of 285.5 hectares of afforestation. Thus, the spaces to be afforested were moved and rearranged or adjusted so that the desired forest expansion remained intact.

In December 2005, the Flemish government approved the RUP. The plan also included a regulation for the compulsory purchase of properties. In practice, however, land acquisition was provisionally settled out of court. In July 2007, a cooperation agreement was signed between the Flemish government and the Province of East Flanders. The former will acquire the land (between 2011 and 2014) and finance the project management, while the latter will coordinate the practical aspects of implementing the project on the ground (2012–2018).

## Recent Developments

The Park Forest Ghent became a flagship for urban forest creation in Flanders. The project also received quite a bit of scholarly attention (e.g. Allaert and Leinfelder, 2005). Implementation practice, however, has had its share of ups and downs, and this was also the case in the rest of Flanders. Although nearly twenty urban forest projects were initiated between 2000 and 2003, political attention (at the regional level) slackened soon thereafter (Ledene et al., 2011). An unfavourable event was the abolition of the Forest Expansion Unit in 2005. Also, many urban forest initiatives remained on paper, partly because the projects were hampered by local politics and RUPs were still lacking. But there were also signs of progress. In the “Flanders in Action Pact 2020” it was claimed that at least half of the cities and towns should have an urban forest (or started a project) by 2020. The Flemish government agreement 2009–2014 was built upon this pact, and also the policy notes of several ministers referred to the need of urban forests. Meanwhile, municipalities increasingly started urban forest projects by themselves, eventually labelling these “play forests”, “birth forests”, “peace forests”, etc. The government’s mobilization of the “forest compensation fund” (revenues from licenced deforestations) was an important driver for such initiatives. Furthermore, there appeared several new supporters of the urban forest idea, such as private firms, public service agencies, and non-governmental organizations. It is notable, moreover, that the nature conservation movement is increasingly advocating the case of forest expansion, and urban forest creation in particular.

## Concluding Observations on Discourse and Strategy

Throughout the years, the urban forest storyline has been told and retold, however, with some updates and adjustments. The most marked change is in the forest functions cited to promote urban forests. The new emphasis is on climate regulation and sustaining human health. Forest functions can indeed be flexibly adapted to the dominant discourses of the time. However, it is not just a tactic to reaffirm the importance of urban forests. The new functions appear to reflect a change in urban forest discourse towards a more people-centred concept. For example, a recent visioning report by the FFA (Ledene et al., 2011) defines (peri-)urban forests as being close to people, meeting the needs of urban dwellers, and forming part of their local community. (Peri-)urban forests are described as green areas with a balanced mix of closed and open landscape, including forests, nature areas, and/or “park structures”. Thus, urban forest discourse is made accessible to a wide range of groups, is no longer disciplinary-controlled by forestry alone, and is more open for place-based interpretation. However, when it comes to achievements, the talk remains rooted in the old forest-centred image, for instance, evaluations are made in terms of “effectively afforested” land.

Likewise, in public campaigns the link with people is sometimes made explicit—e.g. “A Forest for Everyone”—but the numbers of planted trees are placed at the centre of the policy narration. At the ceremony of planting the millionth tree in

Flanders (October 2011), the Minister of Environment presented a new tool (the “Boswijzer”) designed to “objectively measure” the evolution of forests in Flanders against the 2010 baseline. It is relevant to note here that numerical measurement also serves as a tool for political mobilization. Measuring a problem creates pressure to do something about it (Stone, 1988: 131). The selection of the measures can be seen as a strategic component of problem definition, especially when the outcomes are dressed up in a policy narrative (Fischer, 2003: 172).

In this regard, the old urban forest storyline is increasingly replaced by a new storyline, which has as its core the failure to realize ambitions (e.g. in *Natuurpunt*, 2013). Numerical measurements (hectares afforested/deforested, numbers of projects, euros spent) are confronted with the goals set out in the government’s plans and agreements. The next move is to portray the gap between intentions and practice as a consequence of the failure of the government to provide the highly necessary forests. The story concludes with stressing the need to increase efforts and proposing regulatory ways to do so.

The shift in strategy is not surprising. The need for urban forests was already agreed, the discourse reached hegemony and became embedded in the institutions and practices of government. So, today’s efforts for urban forest creation need to concentrate on implementation. However, discursive strategies are also suggestive of the dominant discourses they seek to appeal to. In this case, the institutionalization of urban forest discourse—and its subsequent translation into numerical targets, maps, budgets, regulations, etc.—has led to a formalization and standardization of discourse. The discourse has gradually become enclosed within the formal structure of institutions, including its sets of rules, competences, procedures, techniques, vocabularies, etc. These ultimately limit or condition the possible ways of looking at a problem or situation (Van Herzele and Aarts, 2013).

To conclude, the latest developments do raise some important questions about the effects of discourse institutionalization, in particular at the local level where urban forests are to be implemented. The Park Forest Ghent case revealed that the project’s legitimation in terms of government plans and scientific study could not convince the local people. Likewise, figures of regional (or even local) afforestation targets and achievements would make no impression. Place-based approaches are required instead to make sense of urban forest projects, to mobilize locals and enable them to actively participate in the development of a discourse. In this regard, a further genealogy could focus on the urban forest discourses that develop and are distributed locally. But following Foucault (1981), it is very likely impossible to account for the positive and multiplication effects, if we also do not take into consideration the exclusionary and constraining function of the strategies in use. The interplay of mobilization and exclusion is a challenge for future research!

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## 5 Institutions, Law, and the Political Ecology of Urban Forests

### A Comparative Approach

Blake Hudson

#### Introduction

The governance of urban forests involves a number of cultural, sociological, economic, political, and ecological influences. An additional influence is the institutional and legal context within which urban forestry is situated—a context that provides the overarching framework within which urban forests are created, protected, and managed, on the one hand, or mismanaged or entirely eliminated, on the other hand.

While the urban forest can take many shapes or forms, and no one group will agree on what an urban forest will or should be, one thing is clear—institutional and legal foundations influence the management and protection of the urban forest. At the same time, there is clearly a political element intertwined with institutions and law—an element that plays out significantly at the intersection of forests and urban development. There are important synergies between the institutions within which urban forest policy-makers are embedded and the political choices that drive the utilization and perpetuation of those institutions.

The legal institutions which political actors access both shape and are shaped by the management of the urban forest. Consider the example upon which this chapter primarily focuses, namely, how the constitutional structure of certain federal systems of government can complicate forest management on subnational scales, and in particular urban forest governance. Federal systems of government like Canada and the US divide regulatory authority over certain subject matter between the national government and the numerous subnational governments within their borders (states, provinces, and their constituent local governments). Written constitutions establish the legal framework within which these federal systems operate. This is, of course, an institutional component that can provide governance and resource-management strength or weakness depending on how that authority is allocated. A political component is how that legal framework is, or is not, utilized or adapted, or how laws arising out of the framework are, or are not, enforced and implemented to achieve policy and management goals. So consider the scenario presented by some federal systems whereby subnational governments maintain virtually exclusive control over forest resource management. While some subnational governments may undertake effective management of forests—in the