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WWF Finland's position on logging in Finnish Central Lapland

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Background

The logging of forests in parts of Central Finnish Lapland (the so-called "Forest Lapland") by the State-owned enterprise Metsähallitus at the turn of the year 2006-2007 has been controversial, particularly because the logged forests were in a condition close to their natural state. The loggings have been described as endangering the biodiversity of the region's forests, hindering the preservation of wilderness areas, and also restricting the multiple use of forests, especially concerning reindeer herding and nature tourism. There are also doubts about the prospects for the regeneration of the logged forests, some of which are at high altitudes near the tree line.

According to Metsähallitus, these loggings have been carried out in commercially managed forests in accordance with the relevant natural resource plans, local participatory planning procedures and environmental guidelines. State owned commercial forests in Central Lapland are PEFC-certified.

Forest protection in Northern Finland

Prospects for the safeguarding of forest biodiversity in old-growth forests on State-owned lands in Northern Finland were last significantly enhanced in February 2006, when [dialogue between WWF and Metsähallitus](#) resulted in Metsähallitus's agreement to end commercial forestry permanently in a total area of 55,000 hectares of old-growth forest in the regions of Kainuu, Ostrobothnia, Koillismaa and southern Lapland (south of Inari). This decision resolved a conflict dating back to an earlier decision of 1996 on the conservation of old-growth forests. The 1996 decision covered a region that did not extend as far north as the forests affected by the recent logging.

The decision made on the basis of the WWF-Metsähallitus dialogue enhanced forest protection to some extent in certain forested areas of Central Lapland. Since many of the unprotected forests in this area were known to be old-growth forests in a relatively natural state, Metsähallitus promised to assess possible gaps in the region's network of protected forests before carrying out any more forestry planning and logging.

[A Metsähallitus report published in December 2006](#) states that about 43% of the productive forests in the Central Lapland vegetation zone are under protection, including 465,200 ha of legally protected productive forest and a further 35,500 ha protected under a decision made by Metsähallitus. About 40% of the forests in the area covered by the 'Northern Finland dialogue' (Muonio, Kittilä, Sodankylä, Savukoski and northern Salla) are also under protection. Since scrubland and other unproductive areas also remain outside the scope of commercial forestry, the proportion of State-owned forestlands in Central Lapland where forestry may be practised is about 37% (362,700 ha).

WWF Finland has examined the expertly drafted Metsähallitus report, which confirms that a high proportion of the forests in the Central Lapland vegetation zone are under protection. The report's qualitative assessments of the ages of forests, the total volumes of standing timber, volumes of decaying wood, and the distribution of protected areas with regard to growth site type, altitude and dominant tree



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species all facilitate assessments of the comprehensiveness of the current network of protected forests. The report, however, did not include species-level assessments.

The need for additional forest protection for biodiversity in Central Lapland

Assessments of the quality and quantity of the current network of protected forest area in Central Lapland shall be analyzed in regional, national and international context. WWF Finland believes that the existing network of protected forests can be assumed to safeguard viable populations of forest species in general in the Central Lapland vegetation zone. But additional measures would still be needed to ensure that occurrences of threatened species outside protected areas remain viable. Special consideration should be given to the need to safeguard older forests with many large trees (>30 cm average diameter), since more than half of such forests in Central Lapland lie within commercially forested areas.

However, from national or global perspective, the significance of the remaining extensive areas of unprotected, virtually natural forest in Central Lapland is different. According to national forest inventories the amount of forests in their natural state have declined below 5 % in Finland (Hänninen et al 2006), and within the EU countries the area of such forests is even lower. The decline of intact continuous forest areas is considered a key environmental problem all over the world, and therefore the protection of extensive forest areas which are in a natural state is one of the emphases in international nature conservation policies.

WWF Finland believes that the Finnish Ministry of the Environment must urgently implement the decision made by the work programme for protected areas of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), in order to fulfill obligations set under the Countdown 2010 project and the European Union's Strategy for Sustainable Development (2001). Furthermore, the Finnish Government adopted a new policy decision in December 2006 concerning the national strategy of Finland for the preservation of biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources for 2006–2016. One of the strategy's goals is to promote the preservation of biodiversity by developing the network of nature conservation areas, and improving the conservation of species.

The significance of the remaining extensive areas of unprotected virtually natural forest in Central Lapland should be evaluated in this context, with decisions on additional protective measures made as necessary. Useful background information for this purpose is already available in a [report drafted by Greenpeace, the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation and the Nature League](#), which explains that extensive areas of virtually natural habitat lie outside the current network of protected areas in Central Lapland. The report specifically delimits eight areas of State-owned forest (in Kittilä, Salla, Sodankylä and Savukoski) where protective measures should be prioritized.

Multiple use vital for forests in Central Lapland

WWF Finland believes that areas of virtually natural forest outside Central Lapland's existing network of protected areas contain high conservation values for their multiple uses, many of which will be endangered by loggings similar to those carried out recently. Steps that could be taken to improve the prospects for these high conservation values are described below.

Reindeer herding



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Central Lapland lies within the region of Northern Finland where reindeer herding is practised. Its northernmost reindeer herding district also lies within the designated homeland of the indigenous Sámi people. Reindeer herding is the main livelihood of many local people, and an essential part of the Sámi culture, which must particularly be preserved in the Sámi homeland.

Central Lapland's old-growth forests provide vital winter pastures for reindeer, as they are rich in lichens. Logging in such forests particularly reduces the availability of horsehair lichen, which is mainly found in spruce-dominated forests more than a century old. Tree lichens like horsehair are an important source of nutrition for reindeer in late winter when ground lichens lie under deep snow.

WWF Finland believes it is extremely important to plan the logging of forests in Central Lapland in close co-operation with the representatives of reindeer herders and the indigenous Sámi people so as to create a genuinely shared and documented vision of how lichen forests can be preserved, specifying where, when and how commercial forestry may be practised. Such developments are also required by Finnish legislation on reindeer herding and the Sámi people, as well as international agreements on indigenous peoples' rights.

Tourism

Lapland's natural scenery is a major factor behind the growth of tourism, which is becoming increasingly international. The logging of virtually natural forests can reduce the region's attractiveness for nature tourism by breaking up the landscape and reducing the sense of unspoilt wilderness.

Lapland's total annual income from tourism has been about 400 million euros a year since 2000. This corresponds to about 80% of the value added by the forestry sector across the region. Tourism directly creates some 3,500 – 4,000 jobs in Lapland, which is more than the forestry sector.

WWF Finland believes that the views of the tourism sector should be given much more consideration in plans made by Metsähallitus, so as to create a shared vision of how important forests can be excluded from areas to be logged, specifying where, when and how commercial forestry may be practised.

High altitude forests

According to Finland's forest legislation (Section 12 of the Forest Act), the Government may designate forests for protection where their preservation is necessary to maintain the tree line in its natural position. Such forests should be used and managed with extreme care, to ensure that the tree line does not shift down fell-sides.

At the turn of the year 2006-2007 Metsähallitus carried out clear-cut logging in Central Lapland at several sites of 10-15 ha at altitudes as high as 340-370 metres. Metsähallitus had previously defined such areas as "high forest areas" where special risks affect the potential regeneration of forest. Metsähallitus's definition of high forest areas covered State-owned forests in the Northern Ostrobothnia region at altitudes of more than 280 metres on north- and east-facing slopes, and more than 330 metres on south- and west-facing slopes, as well as certain hilltop forests at lower altitudes.



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Metsähallitus's current forestry guidelines, defined in 1997, state that "...high forest areas should be managed according to the precautionary principle, so as to minimise risks and preserve their wilderness elements. The potentially productive saplings that naturally spring up after regeneration fellings should be exploited. Favourable conditions for regeneration can be created in old pine stands by clearing space to allow young trees to grow. This can ensure that forest coverage will be maintained even during any unfavourable climatic periods."

WWF believes that the uncertain factors affecting the regeneration of high altitude forests in Finnish Lapland mean that special care must still be taken whenever forestry measures are planned in high forest areas. Loggings should only be carried out in pine forests that are able to regenerate naturally, they should only be on a very small scale, and they should ensure that forest coverage remains as uniform as possible. Logging should generally be ended in high spruce forests, due to doubts about their ability to regenerate.

Metsähallitus's current interpretation of forest legislation allows for clear-cut logging and artificial planting in ecologically sensitive high forest areas that are often also of importance for multiple uses. WWF urges the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry to renew Finland's forest legislation rapidly, so as to allow the more flexible application of natural regeneration methods in Lapland, accepting slower-growing natural sapling stands. More research must also be conducted into forest regeneration in high forest areas.

National political debate needed to balance land-uses in state forests

WWF Finland believes that the whole issue of the conservation, multiple use and commercial forestry of State-owned lands in Central Lapland should be the focus of wider national political debate. The ambitious income targets currently set for commercially managed State-owned forests limit Metsähallitus's ability to manage these forests with due consideration to the wishes and needs of other interest groups.

Links to materials mentioned in the statement:

http://panda.org/about_wwf/what_we_do/forests/index.cfm?uNewsID=61220

<http://www.metsa.fi/news.asp?Section=1181&Item=5488>

<http://www.forestinfo.fi/forestlapland/>