

Expanding the Space for Future Resource Management. Explorations of the Timber Frontier in Northern Europe and the Rescaling of Sustainability During the Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

Analysing international forestry congresses and (by way of example) the exploration of Northern Norway and Finland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the article examines the changing conditions of natural resource management in the Baltic and North Sea regions. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the overall increasing consumption of wood and the advancing timber frontier in Northern Europe questioned the Western European perception of Northern Europe as possessing inexhaustible woodlands. At the same time, the expanding railway network in Central Europe overran traditional (local) concepts of sustainable forest management. Since 1873, at international congresses, experts have debated the consequences of these spatial changes for the future prospects of forestry. On the one hand, pessimistic voices warned about a coming worldwide shortage of timber. On the other hand, optimistic statements saw the railway as a solution, as it allowed for timber to be transported wherever rails were laid. In the countries of the Baltic and North Sea regions, state authorities, as well as forestry academies, took up the debate and tried to improve their knowledge of accessible forest resources, for instance by sending expeditions to the woodlands of Northern Europe. The expanding railway network as well as the accumulation and cross border circulation of new knowledge about forest resources led to an ongoing process of rescaling sustainability: forestry experts continuously tried to keep in step with the changing spatial conditions of forestry planning (timber frontier, railway network) and at the same time fostered these changes. Experts suggested and advocated either spatial limit – for instance laws for regional forest protection – or further spatial extensions – such as new railway lines or channels – in order to shape the spatial framework of future forest management.

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