

Loreta Zydeliene

Independence essentials: interwar Lithuanian forestry and why attempts to maintain sustainable forest reserves failed

Since the third partition of Poland in 1795, Lithuania was occupied by Russia until the collapse of the Russian and German empires when Lithuania took advantage of the circumstances and proclaimed independence in 1918.

Being an economically backward state without substantial industries and limited natural resources, Lithuania was dependent on its agriculture and forests to pay its independence bills. Due to the land reform, state ownership of forests increased from 28% before WWI to 84% in 1922. The reform made it easier to control administration and law enforcement on the premises of the state forests. In 1929-1937 forest products comprised around 24% of all Lithuanian exports, meaning, that there was an urgent need for reforestation.

My objective was to investigate the change in the attitude of the society and political circles and find out reasons why protective legislature was vaguely enforced.

Review of interwar Lithuanian periodicals revealed that attitude of the society was highly contentious. Although profession of the forester was generally regarded with great respect among urban population, their work was resented at the ground level, where foresters faced open threats and violence. Farmers genuinely celebrated state independence, yet deliberately resisted limitation on forest use which was associated with constrains on personal liberty as much as threat to their survival. This didn't go unnoticed in the government, which while balancing on high beam of internal and international politics, failed to ensure effective enforcement. During early twenties there was a strong sentiment towards nature in the society, but by the end of the third decade, that was marked by monopolization of forest industry, it finally faded away giving way to a more pragmatic view of the nature.

The attempt to maintain sustainable forest resources was plagued by internal political disturbances as well as complicated international relations, state immediate economic needs, social resistance and change in the attitude towards nature.