

Knowing and Doing Forests
A Sociological Treatise on Forests and Power

Håkon Aspøy

Summary

Forests cover more than a third of Norway's territory. Few other countries have as much privately owned forest land. Forests have played a fundamental role in shaping the country's population geography, providing resources and livelihoods that have enabled the emergence of numerous local communities. Yet, the fact that forests are actively managed often escapes the attention of the average citizen. It is easy to assume that forests simply exist. Behind the scenes, however, forests are entangled in social practices and political agendas, where conflicts frequently erupt.

This dissertation studies forest conflicts. It investigates struggles not only over how forests are politically governed, but also over how they are scientifically defined. In other words, it explores how forests are known and enacted, and how management practices relate to scientific practices.

Two overarching research questions are posed: How do science and politics intersect in forest management? Which interests and actors gain representation, and what are the implications for power relations? To answer these questions, the dissertation analyzes data from 31 in-depth interviews, two periods of qualitative fieldwork, and approximately 300 documents.

Conceptually, the thesis approaches power from a new materialist perspective. It conceives of power as constituted through relations among heterogeneous actors. Two closely related theoretical directions are pursued. First, by drawing on the notion of ontological politics, the thesis examines how interest groups struggle not only over how to act upon forests, but also over which forest realities to act upon. Second, by considering multispecies relationships, it highlights the significance of encounters across species boundaries.

Regarding the first research question, the thesis finds that scientific knowledge and political power are deeply interwoven. This is illustrated by how biodiversity entered the agenda, both as a scientific concept referring to species and habitats, and as a political strategy for nature conservation. Although biodiversity measures were initially introduced by environmental interest groups, they were soon appropriated by forestry groups. Among forestry interest groups, however, efforts have been made to depoliticize biodiversity and decouple it from conservation agendas. In doing so, forestry actors have enacted an alternative ontology of biodiversity, one more closely aligned with, and beneficial to, forestry interests.

Addressing the second research question, the thesis identifies an ongoing struggle between two main constellations of actors: an environmental segment and a forestry segment. The distinction between them is enforced by the actors they enroll, the practices they pursue, and the ontologies they enact. The thesis argues that power is not held by one actor or segment alone; rather, it emerges from the ways in which actors collectively mobilize for a common cause. Both segments have achieved significant influence in this regard. Environmental actors have changed the rules of the game with the concept of biodiversity. However, forestry actors have incorporated elements from environmental ontologies, thereby consolidating their own position. This has affected the environmental segment in two ways: either by rendering certain

ontologies invalid and illegitimate, as in private-sector forestry governance, or by isolating them from forestry and confining them to a separate domain, as in public-sector environmental governance. Nevertheless, the division is not always clear-cut. Several practices receive support across the environmental–forestry divide. In such cases, when conflict is absent, power relations are at their most stable.

The introductory chapter concludes by discussing the key contributions of the thesis. Conceptually, three implications are emphasized. First, the thesis highlights the importance of ontological politics in environmental management, showing how competing realities become embedded in struggles among interest groups. By analyzing biodiversity measures in forestry governance, it demonstrates how seemingly incompatible entities are rendered compatible, and thereby how status quo is maintained despite political change. Second, by focusing on how realities and more-than-human relations are enacted through social practices, the thesis helps bridge the gap between the literatures on ontological politics and multispecies studies. Third, it offers new insights into sectoral tensions and political segmentation, particularly through its ontological multispecies lens.

Two implications for forest management and forest research are also stressed. The unparalleled legitimacy granted to scientific knowledge, coupled with ongoing efforts to depoliticize management, functions as a barrier to broader participation and thus poses a democratic challenge. While science is indispensable for decision-making, other ways of knowing are largely excluded. Cultural and social values associated with forests are often neglected, lacking scientific legitimacy and therefore political recognition. Finally, this reflects another characteristic of Norwegian forest management: the overwhelming dominance of research from the natural sciences. While ecological aspects of forests are extensively studied, far less is known about their social dimensions. To promote inclusion and enable wider participation, more research is needed on how forests are socially valued and how management practices intersect with the social and personal benefits people derive from them.