

Reading guide

WHY DO WE NEED STORIES ABOUT THE FUTURE OF FORESTS IN FINLAND?

There are countless possible futures for forests in Finland, way beyond the four that are presented in this document. Imagining them and making them a reality is largely up to us.

Our image of the future is always a story, a narrative of what is ahead of us. The future only exists in our minds; it does not exist in reality. The stories we have in our minds about the future guide how we perceive the present and our role in it. Our perceptions of the future therefore steer our actions in the here and now.

We perceive the future through the lens of the past. We think that things will happen in much the same way as they have happened before. This makes it difficult for us to imagine futures that differ in unexpected ways from the past and the present. However, in a world that has become unpredictable, we must be able to envisage many different futures so that we can react quickly and wisely to the changes already happening all around us.

Climate change and the loss of biodiversity are irreversibly altering living conditions in our forests. The global economy and geopolitical order are in transition. At the same time, as the roles of people in Finland shift in relation to forest, so do our relationships with forests at large. Being an owner, user, manager, or protector of the forest changes its meaning across time. We need stories about the future to help us imagine the effects of these changes and develop meaningful visions for the future.

These four stories of forest futures have been written as background material for further work. We hope that these stories will help the reader identify new forms of action. It would be wonderful to see many different people and organisations use the stories to shape their own visions of future forests.

	FOREST AREA	AREA OF COMMERCIAL FORESTS	PROTECTED AREA	CARBON SINK	ENDANGERED SPECIES	THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FORESTRY FOR THE ECONOMY	IMPACTS ON EMPLOYEMENT
FOREST FOXHOLES	▼	▼	▲	▼	▲	▼	▼
WOOD VALLEYS	▲	▼	▲	▲	▼	▲	●
PROTECTED LAND	●	▼	▲	▲	▼	▼	▼
HAUNTED FOREST	▼	▼	▼	▼	▲	▼	▼

▲ INCREASED SLIGHTLY ▲ INCREASED A LOT ▼ SHRUNK SLIGHTLY ▼ SHRUNK A LOT ● STAYED THE SAME

BACKGROUND TO THE FOUR STORIES OF FOREST FUTURES

The stories are based on dialogues held during the Great Forest Dialogue Day, coordinated by the Metsän puolella (For the Woods) initiative and Dialogue Academy. In the dialogues, people from very different backgrounds in the forest sector and across society reflected on their own relationship with forests as well as their fears and hopes for the future of forests. Anonymised materials from the dialogues were compiled and analysed to inform the development of the future stories presented here.

FOUR COMMON VIEWS OF THE FUTURE REPEATED IN THE FOREST DIALOGUES:

- “Forest Foxholes”** fear of deepening forest disputes
- “Wood Valleys”** hope for a breakthrough in innovative wood-based product
- “Protected Land”** hope for extensive conservation to strengthen the ecological state of forests
- “Haunted Forest”** fear of destruction caused by ecological neglect

These four themes were used to create four separate stories about the future of forests in Finland of 2050. The idea is that in 25 years’ time, forests and their use may look very different from today. Each of the four stories describes a different potential course of development and emphasises the perspectives of different actors.

The purpose of the stories is not to predict what will happen to forests in Finland. Rather, they are fictional thought experiments that explore four very different futures. Together, they aim to challenge our assumptions and provide material for flexible thinking about the future. The developments presented in the stories can also be combined and serve as inspiration for completely different stories. The purpose of this exercise is to encourage open-minded visions of the future that can bring together different actors.

THE STORIES HAVE FOUR COMMON ASSUMPTIONS

- On a global level, climate change and the loss of biodiversity will continue, but their pace will not accelerate dramatically.
- The global economy will remain market based.
- Technology will develop, but there will be no completely unexpected changes in terms of forest use.
- The European Union will continue to regulate economic and ecological matters, but Finland will retain considerable power to decide how to use its forests.

The four stories of forest futures share the assumptions described above. The focus of the stories’ events is on Finland, even though global trends also have a strong impact on forest use within our country. The purpose is to draw attention to the fact that we are not merely at the mercy of world events, but that people and organisations residing in Finland also have a great deal of influence over the future of our forests. Each story begins with a summary of the state of forests in Finland in 2050, compared to 2026.

Forest Foxholes 2050

Disputes over forest use are dividing society ever more deeply. The deadlock has made it impossible to find national-level solutions for improving the ecological condition of forests. The threat of ecological collapse and a decline in timber supply for industrial needs are a constant concern.



WHAT ARE FORESTS LIKE?

The ecological condition of forests has deteriorated. Most forests are used for commercial purposes, and pests have already destroyed large forest areas. Protected areas have grown only slightly, forests' carbon sink capacity is decreasing, and biodiversity loss is accelerating. The condition of waterbodies is deteriorating.

HOW DO PEOPLE ACT?

The commercial use of forests divides society. The forest industry produces low-value-added products from wood, but its commercial viability is declining. A growing number of forest owners have decided to protect their forests. Meanwhile, a large number of forest owners are selling timber at an accelerating rate.

LIVING CONDITIONS FOR OTHER SPECIES

As a result of nature loss, many species have disappeared and the number of critically endangered species is growing. However, many protected areas have succeeded in improving the living conditions of some species, but the situation is fragile.

ECOLOGY AND ECONOMY

Ecological and economic values are in strong tension with each other. Inadequate measures to improve the ecological condition of forests have weakened their economic benefits.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

In the latter half of the 2020s, there was heated debate in Finland about the future of forests. In particular, the views of forest industry operators and conservationists on the use of forests diverged widely. Struggling with declining productivity, the forest industry continued to manufacture low-value-added products, and logging volumes remained high. Expert groups proposed urgent measures to improve the ecological condition of forests, but decisions at the national level were made based on short-term economic prospects. Forest owners were encouraged to protect forests voluntarily, even though the state did not offer any significant financial incentives for this.

As climate change and biodiversity loss progressed in the 2030s, the condition of forests deteriorated rapidly.

The spread of pests accelerated, causing widespread destruction, especially in forests dried out by hot summers. The Finnish government sought to develop nature value markets to improve the condition of forests and increased compensation for forest protection. At the same time, a growing number of forest owners, frustrated by the inadequacy of the measures, took independent action to protect their forests. Companies in the forest industry saw the situation as a threat to their business. They stepped up their campaigning to secure the supply of raw material and warned that the value of forest holdings would collapse if the forest industry disappeared from Finland. Many private forest owners, as well as municipalities and parishes in financial difficulties, sold their forests to international funds, which began to harvest them at an accelerating pace.

The felling of nearby forests spread forest disputes to more urbanized areas, and thousands of people were mobilised into activism to protect the forests. Logging operations began to be suspended across Finland, individual forest owners were threatened with public shaming for destroying nature, and forestry machinery was increasingly targeted by vandalism.

The 2040s were a period of stagnation for forests. This had a negative impact on nature, the economy, and people. The progression of climate change caused increasing damage to forests with limited species diversity. Continued clear-cutting and drainage of bogs increased the eutrophication of lakes and ponds. Fewer and fewer people could dip into the refreshing water at their summer cottages. Biodiversity loss accelerated, even though some species were saved through the creation of new protected areas. The forest industry shrank as its profitability continued to decline. At the end of the decade, the situation is fragile and tense. There is constant concern about the threat of ecological collapse in the forest environment and a decline in the supply of wood for industrial needs. There are increasingly violent clashes between forest conservationists, the police, and forestry operators. Activists have received long prison sentences, and forestry companies are pressuring the Finnish parliament to ban citizen activism related to forests.



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Wood Valleys 2050

Forests are used to produce innovative, highly refined products. Logging has been restricted, and in many areas it has stopped completely. A new type of economic use of forests helps preserve the ecological balance of forests.



WHAT ARE FORESTS LIKE?

Forests are being utilised in new ways, the amount of logging has decreased, and raw material is being locally processed into higher-value products. Large areas of forest have been restored and protected. These measures have intrinsic value, but they also aim to protect economically significant forest areas from the effects of climate change and biodiversity loss.

HOW DO PEOPLE ACT?

The production of wood raw material is limited to certain areas where forests are managed using ecologically sustainable forestry methods. Higher value-added products and land restoration are providing employment for an increasing number of people.

LIVING CONDITIONS FOR OTHER SPECIES

The reduction in logging has improved living conditions for many species. The species composition in commercially managed forests is more homogenous than elsewhere. However, large, protected areas and ecological corridors enable species to move to more favorable areas.

ECOLOGY AND ECONOMY

The economic value of forests is seen as being linked to their ecological condition. Making ecological sustainability a prerequisite has brought ecology and economics into near balance with each other.

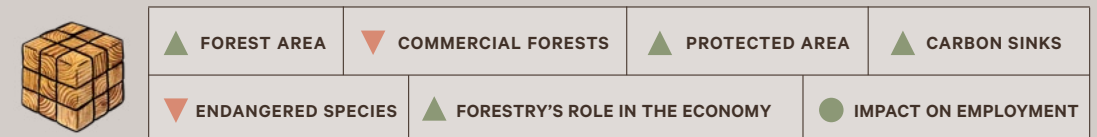
HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Wildfires in Central Europe accelerated in the latter half of the 2020s, and a broad civil movement emerged to protect forests. At the heart of the movement was a campaign focused on boycotting products made from pulp. This targeted packaging for products ordered from China in particular, and as a result, Chinese online stores switched to using packaging materials produced in Russia. At the same time, concerned about the consequences of shrinking carbon sinks, the Finnish government directed tax breaks towards investments in product development in the forestry sector.

In its risk analyses, the forest industry concluded that pulp production in Finland was not on a sustainable economic footing. When real demand for raw materials to replace plastics and other commercial chemicals began to emerge in the European market, forest industry companies began to finance forestry start-ups in Finland. The start-ups received surprising public support from environmental organisations, which saw the new products as a path to more ecologically sustainable forest use. The positive publicity received by the companies also encouraged private individuals and international financiers to invest in them. The first start-up cluster was established in Kouvola and the second in Kemi. A network supporting innovation was established around the start-ups, with research and educational institutions working closely with the companies. These clusters were called 'Wood Valleys', partly as a tribute to the wood construction cluster established in Karstula in the 1990s and partly out of a desire to create an image of Finnish forestry expertise as being on a par with Silicon Valley in the United States.

In the 2030s, Finland saw the start of a transformation in forestry. Rare raw materials sourced from the forest became pioneers of innovation, finding use in the pharmaceutical industry, which was striving for self-sufficiency in Europe, as well as in other chemicals refined from forest industry by-products. This was followed by the wide-scale development of wood-based textile fibers as the leading circular economy material in the clothing industry, and biocomposites as a substitute for plastic. The progression of climate change and the spread of pests in forests caused widespread concern among forest owners and industry about the dramatically increasing value of forest assets. The state established mandatory nature value and carbon markets. The use of wood for industrial energy production was banned. The production of wood-based raw materials was concentrated in distinct areas, while in other areas logging was restricted or stopped altogether. Continuous cover forestry became the prevailing forest management method, providing many forest owners with a steady income from their forests. The forest industry's pulp-based business declined sharply, and two large forest industry companies moved most of their production to the Global South.

The condition of forests began to improve in the 2040s. Increased protected areas, restoration measures, and carefully monitored forestry helped forested nature and waterways adapt better to the warming climate. The kingfisher, which had previously almost disappeared from Finland, was removed from the list of endangered species. New innovations emerged in accelerating numbers in the 'Wood Valleys'. Wood was successfully used to manufacture structures that were more durable than metal. Finnish wood-based wind power technology also became an important part of the global transition to renewable energy sources. By 2050, Finland has become an internationally significant pioneer in the new forest industry, attracting international funding and expertise to the country.



Protected Land 2050

60 percent of forests in Finland are protected. The forest industry has shrunk and mainly manufactures products for the domestic market. The ecological condition of forests has improved, and they are better able to adapt to climate change.



WHAT ARE FORESTS LIKE?

Forests used for commercial purposes have decreased significantly. There is very little industrial-scale logging. Numerous old-growth and natural forests have been preserved. The quality of water bodies has improved in many areas.

HOW DO PEOPLE ACT?

Forests are no longer seen as a nationally significant source of economic wealth. Some communities that relied on the forest industry have experienced negative impacts of this change, while others have adapted well. Recreational use of forests has increased, giving rise to new livelihoods.

LIVING CONDITIONS FOR OTHER SPECIES

The decline in biodiversity has slowed down in Finnish forests, and many previously endangered species are now on the rise. Thanks to the extensive protection of forests, species are better able to adapt to climate change.

ECOLOGY AND ECONOMY

Ecological sustainability sets strict constraints on the economy.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Although ecological knowledge about the state of forests and the necessary conservation measures increased in the mid-2020s, national measures to halt nature loss and climate change were minimal. The forest industry focused on manufacturing pulp-based products, and logging volumes remained high. Pests from Central Europe began to spread widely in Finnish forests, and a growing number of citizens and researchers loudly demanded stronger protection for forests. The deterioration of forest ecology became increasingly visible to the public.

The summer of 2029 was unprecedentedly hot across Europe. Large areas of forest all around Finland, left vulnerable to fires by pest invasions and draining of peatlands, burned down completely. The forest fires destroyed a large part of the Koli national landscape, thousands of people lost their summer cottages, thick smoke covered Tampere for several weeks, and many farmers lost their crops. As a result of the 'June events', a pervasive citizens' movement arose in Finland to demand binding legislation to protect forests. Large demonstrations were organised across the country. Farmers who joined the protests filled the area in front of the Parliament House with manure, and numerous forestry contractors blocked the streets of Helsinki with charred tree trunks. High school students refused to collect their diplomas in protest of their lost future.

To maintain social stability, the state decided in the early 2030s to protect most of its forests. However, this was not enough for citizens. Thousands of people across the country began actively monitoring logging in the forests and reporting even the smallest acts of destruction of nature. Political pressure increased when actors in the Finnish financial sector published grim risk assessments on the effects of widespread destruction of forest nature on the national economy. Ultimately, logging volumes were restricted to ecological limits determined by scientific knowledge. These decisions triggered a major transformation in the forest industry. The price of wood rose sharply, forcing numerous factories to close. The remaining forest industry focused mainly on the production of hygiene and food packaging products for the domestic market. Most jobs in forestry disappeared. The state offered support for retraining and small-scale entrepreneurship in forest-related health, tourism, and restoration sectors. Some communities that had depended on the forest industry found themselves in dire straits as people moved away in search of work. Others, however, managed to seize the opportunities created by restoration activities as well as health and nature tourism.

In the 2040s, the condition of forests began to recover in many areas. Artificial intelligence-enhanced technology is used to closely monitor the development of forest conditions and to quickly address any neglect. As a result, the spread of pests can be slowed down, and forest nature is better able to adapt to a warming climate. Many species' populations have started to grow again, and the remaining forest industry does not pose a risk to the ecology of forests and waterways. Forest owners who invested in restoration are beginning to reap the rewards of their forests' nature values. The improving condition of forests, along with clean water, air and soil are creating a positive image of Finland as a responsible and nature-friendly pioneer. Forest trips, fishing, birdwatching, mushroom foraging, and midnight sun-themed forest events have become very popular, providing employment for many residents of small communities. Real-time monitoring of species living in Finnish forests has become a global meditative pastime.



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Haunted Forest 2050

Forests are a mere shadow of what they used to be. The soil, water, and air are polluted beyond repair. Ecological collapse is devastating the national economy and destroying well-being.



WHAT ARE FORESTS LIKE?

Extreme weather events, pests, and forest fires have destroyed hundreds of thousands of hectares of forests. The ecological balance of forests has been disrupted, and the condition of waterbodies has deteriorated significantly.

HOW DO PEOPLE ACT?

Living conditions are desperate for many people. Forests are still being cut down, but the yield is small. There are fewer berries, mushrooms, and game in the forests every year. The loss of forested nature is affecting the mental health of many people.

LIVING CONDITIONS FOR OTHER SPECIES

The loss of biodiversity has accelerated. Hundreds of species have gone extinct, and thousands are critically endangered. Harmful invasive species are spreading, upsetting the ecological balance.

ECOLOGY AND ECONOMY

Ecological indifference has destroyed the economic foundation of society.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

From 2026 onwards, the Finnish economy began to steadily contract. At the same time, military spending and rising public sector costs increased government expenditure. Forest industry operators pushed for higher logging levels by presenting optimistic prospects for innovations in the bioeconomy and threatening scenarios of a total collapse of the Finnish economy. The state supported the forest industry with corporate subsidies and tax breaks, but new innovations that would increase added value failed to materialise. As the difficult economic situation continued, Finland abandoned its climate and nature goals in the late 2020s. The decision was met with fierce opposition, but the increased activism of citizens was curbed by strict legislation. No new protected areas were established, logging levels remained high, and attempts were made to increase timber production by planting Douglas fir trees imported from North America.

In the 2030s, pests destroyed large areas of species-poor commercial forests. The situation in the forests was exacerbated by the hot and dry summers brought about by climate change, which caused major forest fires. Over the course of the decade, the area of forest suitable for commercial use decreased significantly. Unstable economic conditions and the deteriorating state of the forests caused panic among forest owners. This accelerated logging, and forests began to be felled in ever-increasing quantities. Even protected areas were felled with special permits granted by the state. Conservationists, who found themselves in a tight spot, focused their efforts on saving at least some of Finland's national parks. The amount of timber suitable for industrial production decreased year by year, causing the price of timber to rise to unprecedented levels. Low-value-added products manufactured in Finland were no longer able to compete in the market with cheap products from China and Russia. The profitability of the forest industry in Finland plummeted, many areas became deserted, and thousands of workers were left without jobs.

As the 2040s approached, effects of the deteriorating condition of the forests on the rest of nature, the national economy and people's living conditions began to be felt throughout society. Thousands of hectares of spruce forests died, spreading the destruction all around Finland. Pollinators had disappeared from many forests, and with them blueberries and lingonberries. Birds were only able to nest in a few areas, and their songs were no longer heard in the forest's canopy. Fish stocks had declined in the darkened lakes.

The vendace had disappeared completely. In some parts of the country, groundwater reserves had also been depleted, and producing clean water became expensive. Eventually, pests also spread to crops. Grain yields declined and food prices rose. Droughts, heavy rains and floods caused by climate instability brought famine back to Finland.

At the end of the decade, it became apparent how soil, water and air pollution were increasing health problems among the population, and public health costs rose year on year. The gap between rich and poor widened; few could afford comprehensive healthcare and a large proportion of Finns struggled to put food on the table every day. The vibrant nature familiar from holiday photos and hiking videos from the early 2000s was now only found in a few forest reserves. The last bear was seen in the forests of Finland in 2048.



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HOW TO USE THE STORIES OF FOREST FUTURES: A GUIDE

We advise you to begin by reading through all the material together with your group. The guidelines below will help you form your own vision of the future you want to achieve, and a roadmap for getting there. You can also use the Stories of Forest Futures freely in your own way. Each exercise includes a time estimate.

1

5–10 min.

Start the work in pairs with the following question:

“Tell each other what these stories evoke in you and what you feel is significant when thinking about forests in 2050.”

2

40 min.

After working in pairs, share your thoughts with the whole group. Try to bring out the perspectives of all participants.

You can continue the work with these follow-up questions:

“Which different individuals and groups are significant actors in the stories?”

“What kind of action can turn things in a positive direction?”

“What should be avoided?”

“What is our role in shaping the direction?”

3

20 min.

Write a description of the future in 2050 that is as concrete as possible, in about 10 sentences, so that the impacts of your own actions are considered as well.

“What will the forests be like?”

“How will people behave?”

“How do ecology and the economy relate to each other?”

4

30 min.

Once you have written down your vision of the future, start working backwards to the present moment. You can draw events on a timeline as you work backwards decade by decade from the year 2050.

“What pivotal events occurred in different decades to bring about this outcome?”

“What was done and who was involved?”

“What was our role?”

5

10 min.

Finally, think about the first concrete step you will take as you move towards your Forest Vision 2050.

“What will we do?”

“Who will do what?”

“By when will it be done?”
