Forest sciences in the world of tomorrow

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The need is stressed for forest researchers to keep abreast of not only what is happening in their own fields, but also what is happening in related fields and in global forest policy. It is argued that this expansion of forest research will bring it in potential competition with allied sciences but, in the world of tomorrow, this integrative nature will actually be the strength of forest science.

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It can always be said that forest research is in a time of major change. Science is a continuous process, and the mass of knowledge is always accumulating. However, the speed of change seems to be accelerating, and forest researchers may sometimes be ill-equipped to cope with these changes. There is an urgent need for forest researchers to keep abreast of not only what is happening in their own fields, but also what is happening in related fields. In addition, now more than ever, they need to be informed of what is happening in the global forest policy arena, as this can strongly influence the research priorities set by countries and funding institutions and through this, the research undertaken by individual scientists.

The changes are having far-reaching implications. Traditional research institutes are being identified as potential competition with allied sciences, whereas companies such as C-Questor are developing technologies (including silvicultural solutions) to combat global warming. Both of these examples are based on sound scientific research, and there are many other examples.

Researchers and research institutions are also seeing their value being questioned. Increasingly, governments are demanding that all publicly-funded scientists demonstrate their value to society. This may involve massive research evaluation exercises, as has happened in the United Kingdom, or it may involve the regular review of research institutions and researchers by groups of external scientists. Such exercises can be difficult, particularly for individuals and institutions that are not keeping up with changing societal expectations.

Researchers themselves are seeing the ways in which scientific information is communicated changing rapidly. The recent surge in open access journals is one manifestation of this, whereas the increasing popularity of tools such as Wikipedia illustrates the desire of the general public for trustworthy information. Such information sources are a potential threat to the traditional peer-reviewed scientific process, a problem that we need to solve, quickly.

IUFRO will try to facilitate the adaptation of the forest research community to these changes, but it will require a concerted effort by us all if we are to be successful.

Acknowledgments

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