RESEARCH PAPER

Social Learning as a Basis for Cooperative Small-Scale Forest Management

Tom Dedeurwaerdere

Abstract   This paper analyses the governance characteristics of an innovative policy instrument for sustainable forest management in Flanders, namely a mechanism based on social learning and collaborative planning within joint forest management organizations. These organizations have been successful in involving non-industrial private forest owners in managing the transition towards sustainable management in small-scale forestry. Why was this innovative scheme successful? And what are its shortcomings and possible limitations? The hypothesis developed in this paper is that the success of the forest groups has been made possible by the explicit organization of a process of social learning, leading to change in the beliefs and the social norms of forest owners and users. Based on the analysis of this case of cooperative forestry, and on theoretical insights from governance theory, the contribution to fostering social learning from three distinct mechanisms is established, these being (1) the recourse to sustainability criteria and indicators as an open-ended learning device, (2) the experimentation with disruptive action strategies to put new beliefs into practice, and (3) the building of new forms of social cooperation around these new beliefs and practices.

Keywords   Forest groups · Institutional analysis · Governance · Coupled socio-ecological systems

Introduction

Socio-economic research in the last decade has shown that a strict focus on the species diversity concept, and the related policy of strict nature reserves, is not

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