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Reversing the European Trend Toward a Declining Land Carbon Sink?

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The announced goal of reversing the European trend toward a declining land carbon sink has garnered much ink. Words can, however, be misleading. Annual additions/contributions (sinks) to the land carbon sink (stocks) from growing forest and increasing forest cover have slowed marginally in recent years. However, the existing European land forest sink (stocks) has (have) expanded continuously across most or all of the 20th century and on into the 21st. More importantly perhaps, EU Member states with significant long-term investments in the forestry sector have historically witnessed strong forest expansion and *not* merely with the initiation of international attention to climate change mitigation through the UNFCCC negotiating and climate commitment framework. In this context, frequent assaults on forestry from multiple directions are cause for some bewilderment. We first highlight weaknesses in claims of increased forest use intensity and illustrate that forestry in the Nordic countries has a remarkably small and stable footprint over the 20th and 21st centuries. Addressing the second problem, however, understanding why such attacks occur in the first place, is more complex. Methodologically speaking, challenges to forestry should presumably be balanced by an understanding of the many human welfare benefits forests and the practice of forestry currently provide, as well as the costs of relinquishing those practices. Perhaps due to strong preferences among NGO's and in parts of the academic community for natural, untouched, biodiverse forests, the benefits of forestry and forest resource use are consistently under-appreciated. Striking a balance between the desire for natural and biodiverse-rich forest environments on the one hand, and the climate change mitigation (and adaptation) benefits of forestry, forest resource use and substitution on the other is presumably a political and socio-economic necessity. The real question may be to what extent bias in favor of the "*natural*" may ultimately disrupt real, measurable progress toward effective climate change mitigation? Continuous, positive mitigation-related contributions to the growing European land cover sink (stocks), as well as to the global carbon budget (through annual net removals and substitution), have been and should remain the norm. These goals ultimately require an aggressive EU LULUCF strategy capable of fully mobilizing forest and forest resource use in favor of the goal of climate change mitigation (and adaptation).

