Forest Certification

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Forest certification may verify sustainable development practices in primary forest production. However, certification of privately owned forest lands cannot be taken for granted, as it is associated with the demands and challenges of forest management. Despite these challenges, some private owners of forest lands chose to certify their operations.

Keywords: forest certification ; means end ; small private forest owners

1. Introduction

The increased focus on sustainable development points to the need to develop corporate social responsibility (CSR). For the forest industry, corporate responsibility means managing resources with environmental, economic and social value dimensions in mind in a circular bioeconomy [1][2]. Managing forestry resources is a shared responsibility for different kinds of forest owners, privately owned industrial or family, and state-owned forest land. In Sweden, a large portion of forest land is owned by small private forest owners, referred to as *family forest owners* or *non-industrial forest owners*. A forestry smallholder in Sweden is defined as owning a maximum of 1000 hectares forest land according to the Swedish Forest Agency [3]. All these forest owner constellations face increased expectations of responsible resource management.

CSR in forestry management manifests in several ways, for example several of the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) can be applied to forests and forestry [4]. However, the certification of forestry management is the most common way to structure the management of a continuous CSR improvement process [5]. It also serves as the grounds for communicating these efforts. A number of Swedish forest owners are involved in one of the two forest certification schemes for smallholders through either the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and/or the Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) [6][7]. They have thereby committed to sustainable development through their certification, and they are responsible to meet certain forest management requirements. Small private forest owners are often included in group certification through their membership in forest owners' associations. The group certification offers advantages in the certification procedures in shared learning and lowered costs. However, group certification does not always require strong intrinsic motives to be certified [8]. As a consequence, sustainable development is often considered to be less prioritised by this category of forest owners [9]. Given the proportion of privately owned forest land and the fact that these forests may provide services for many stakeholders above and beyond that of providing timber for the forest owner, this forest owner group is very important for the development of sustainable forest-management procedures.

Sustainability worldviews can influence forest management activities [10]. This is the case for community-based forest value alignment that has been proven to be an important factor for forest certification [11]. It points to the fact that small private forest owners may enrol in certification programs due to the fact that they already manage their forest in line with certification requirements [12]. However, environmentally focused policies can have an impact on forest-management behaviour, but they do not alter inherent values and objectives [13].

CSR motives for certification are complex, and the consequences of certification are uncertain [5]. While the expected economic and social benefits are strong motivational factors to adopt to certification programs for protecting biodiversity, intrinsic motives can reduce the importance of financial motives [14]. Forest certification may lead to decreased harvesting due to the environmental and social restrictions associated with the certification. However, forest certification can also lead to increased harvesting [15]. Forest owners with multiple objectives have been found to be less involved in forest certification due to lower financial incentives [16].

If forest-management certification is seen from a neoliberal perspective [17], it is a market-driven mechanism that considers the environmental, social and economic dimensions of value creation that raise the awareness of sustainable forest management [18]. Compliance with certification requirements is seen as a voluntary commitment that goes beyond legal requirements. Voluntary forest conservation is expected to increase among small private forest owners [19]. Policy

pressures and market demands therefore lead to small private forest owners experiencing an increased pressure from society to consider sustainable development in their management practices [20].

Scientific studies of the adoption of standards are bound to changes in contexts. These changes in contexts are seen in developments in institutional conditions, as well as in changes in ownership demographics [21]. They point to the need to update the understandings of motives for forestry sustainability certifications. Most studies of forestry certifications are of quantitative nature. Previous qualitative studies focused on in-depth and context-based knowledge of forest owners and certifications have been used to study drivers and barriers for smallholder certification [22], forest owners' interest and perception prior certification [23], and the role of intermediary organisation [24]. These studies have contributed to the identification of a research gap that relates to the demographics of current small forestry owners and their motives to certify their forestry operations. Researchers focuses on certified small private forest owners' motives and experiences of being certified. The project contributes to a contemporary understanding of motives for corporate responsibility, which, in this case, is a certification that contributes to national goals of sustainable development [25]. By gaining an in-depth understanding of the role of forest certification in small-scale forest management and how it affects forest owners, this can further guide actors developing policies to support forest owners' involvement in and contribution to sustainable development. The aim is to explain forest owners' motives and the objectives for forest certification as part of sustainable development. It focuses on how the experience of certification is aligned with their goals and objectives for forest ownership.

2. Forest Certification and Contribution to Environmental Responsibility

The concept of forest certification was developed through a multi-stakeholder dialogue that was initiated in the early 1990s. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local forestry industry actors and global processing and retail companies were concerned about the lack of legal requirements and global coordination in forestry [26]. Forest certification was seen as a solution, a market driven voluntary tool that goes beyond legal requirements. From a forest owner's perspective, the purpose of certification was assumed to be to gain a competitive advantage in line with market development based on customers preferring more sustainable practices [27]. In Sweden, there are two dominating forest certification schemes FSC, founded by NGOs and global companies, as well as PEFC established by forest owners' associations in Europe [15].

Looking at forestry certification in Sweden with a historic perspective, Swedish forest companies with timber processing were early adopters of forest certification, which paved the way for one of the first national standards [13]. However, the adoption of certification programs among primary producers and forestry owners did not follow the same quick adoption of certification schemes. It was not until the forest owners' association started to offer certification to their members, around the year 2000, that the forestry certification was established as a procedure among small private forest owners [15][28]. The format for the certification was that of group certification, managed by forest companies or certification organisations. This meant that the motives for certification for the forest owners were altered; peer pressure, benchmarking and group practices may have lowered the threshold for certification [24].

IThe personal characteristics of the owners were assumed to influence their forest management and conservation practices. Variables and characteristics that have shown to have explanatory value for management practices are related to property size [29][30], financial dependence of income from forest management [31] and gender—female forest owners value environmental and social aspects of forest management higher than male forest owners [32]. Male forest owners, on the other hand, are more prone to engage actively in forest management, such as forest certification activities [30][33]. These variables may be interdependent, and they also vary over time, as ownership changes and institutional conditions change.

Interest in forest management planning can influence forest owners towards stewardship or certification programs [29]. Developing a forest-management plan is an important factor that indicates active forest owners [34]. On the other hand, forest certification can also encourage forest owners to become more active when they obtain a forest management plan through the certification process, thereby decreasing conservation values [15]. Active forest owners are more responsive to information regarding voluntary conservation. Therefore, the challenges relate to reaching passive forest owners [35]. Creamer et al. conclude that forest owners who focus on values other than income from production are less aware of forest certification, and further studies are needed to estimate how the forest owner's specific context impacts their understanding of certification [16]. Today, forest certification is well-established in the Swedish forest context, and forest owners with multiple objectives are just as likely to be aware about forest certification. Forest owners that don't experience the financial benefits of forest certification can still be interested in certification due to value alignment [24]. Contributing to environmental responsibility through certification is an important motive [11][36].

Knowledge about forestry can influence forest management strategy [31]. Many small private forest owners are assumed not to have the knowledge required to make an informed decision about forest certification. The knowledge exchange between forest owners and actors involved in the certification process is necessary for understanding the costs and benefits associated with forest certification [23]. The forest owners' association and other intermediary organisations are therefore important actors for enrolling and reaching out to forest owners [24][31]. Personal advice and information from government or forestry professionals have also proven to be an effective way to promote more sustainable forest practices and policy [13].

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