

## Serbia / Kosovo Report Sept '24



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## Serbian Conference

Forestry in the Balkans is as historic as it comes, with a few surprises along the way. Serbia has a forest cover of 29% with a 47/53 split between private and state ownership, with the latter managed by two organisations: Serbian Forests and Vojvodinsume. The historic Serbia Faculty of Forestry is in Belgrade, and with the help from the ICF Education and Scientific Trust Fund, I was able to present and attend the three-day PEN-CARoRR Final Conference in September 2024. The conference was organised by Full Professor Vladan Ivetic, and it was primarily a roundup of the forestry projects being supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) funding, which was delivered by professors and scientists from all over the world. Having known Vladan for several years, it was suggested that a practical-based presentation would be both useful and interesting for the attendees. As the primary COST Action CA19128 was Climate Adaptive Forest, I decided to present on how the UK establishes forests and what some of the issues and hurdles are for Climate Change – certainly a tall order for 15 minutes.



Photo 1 Simon giving his talk

The presentation covered areas from site selection, ground preparation techniques, planting stock, planting methods and tree protection. I emphasised the importance of post-planting maintenance, and it was interesting to hear that this is an area also often neglected around the world, with efforts focused on the planting of a tree rather than its ultimate success. The presentations ranged from innovations in nursery production to classifying beech sub-species from satellite imagery. In all, it was a full two days of presentations and posters, with some excellent ‘forest’ chat too.



Photo 1.2 Conference group outside Faculty

## Site Visit

The third day was very special, as the group headed northwest of Belgrade to the site of the Pannonian Sea. This ancient sea (or lake as it became) existed around 10 million years ago, fed by waters to the north, but geological movements cut the supply, and the sea became a lake, which ultimately dried up over time, forming a sandy desert. The last area to be classed as shallow water was the Slavonian Lake, and this is the area the group visited to see how the state forest company Vojvodinsume is reforesting areas within.

The Deliblato Sands Special Nature Reserve is known as the oldest desert in Europe and covers 16,000ha. The main buildings at the southern entrance have had various uses over the years, including a school, refugee shelters and now a visitor centre. The area is unique in several ways due to the sandy soils, the cold Kosava winds and the lack of surface water.



Photo 1.3 Interpretation Board

The first management plan for the area was created in 1912 as a reaction to the shifting sands and erosion. Prior to this, the main species used to stabilise the land were mainly Grey Poplar, Oak, Lime and Pine, with Scots and Black Pine being extensively used after the plan was created. Small pockets of autochthonous Oak and Lilly-of-the-Valley are still in evidence.

### Fire

Fire risk is very high, and this aspect is taken very seriously. This region is prone to very high temperatures and low rainfall. Smoke-detecting cameras monitor the areas, and if fire does break out, staff, locals and farm workers join forces to fight the fire with 500 litre mobile tankers. In 1996, 5500ha was burnt, and it continued to burn underground for many months. A characteristic of pine tree fires is the exploding cones, which can spread the fire 20–30 metres.



Photo 1.4 Fire Tower

### *Current Tree Species and Mammals*

Presently, the main tree and shrub species are Pine, Accacia, Thorn, Black Poplar, Oak, Juniper and Lime. Some species are classed as invasive such as Thorn, Acacia and a relatively new introduction of Ailanthus. Reforestation is a mixture of underplanting and regeneration, but the high populations of mammals such as Carpathian deer, rabbit



*Photo 1.5 Deliblato Reserve*

and wild boar make it difficult. Fencing is carried out and sometimes electrified, but this is in conflict with the paid hunters from Serbia and beyond, who control deer numbers and provide an income for the reserve. Some areas are open to cattle, and the total 38,000ha area is home to around 1,000 bird species. Bears visit the area but are not resident, and lone wolves have been seen periodically.

### *Timber*

Despite the entire woodland area being certified under FSC (as are all the Serbian state forests), the focus on timber production is very low, with any produce being limited to firewood and occasional timber lengths. Quality is poor, and access is restricted. Serbia also has a shortage of forest workers and contractors, with the faculty reporting dropping numbers of forest-related students each year. Some illegal activities take place with people taking timber and forest foods.



*Photo 1.6 Fire damage and regeneration*

## Republic of Kosovo

Neighbouring Kosovo was the destination following the conference. I had two events planned with Kosovo Tree Council. The first was to meet with Kosovo Forest Agency in the beech woodlands around the Sharr Mountains, and the second was to supply and plant 12 semi-mature trees in the local school in Suhareka. It was very clear that the exceptional four-month dry period had taken its toll on the forests, with browning canopies and dead trees in abundance. They told me temperatures of up to 45 degrees had been common this year, and the effects have been terrible.



*Photo 1.7 Drought-stressed forests*

### *Beech Woodlands*

Driving up the narrow, twisty and steep unmade roads within the Sharr National Park was quite an experience in the little car, as it scrambled for grip over the rocks. It was decided that the heaviest of the two passengers had to get out and walk a few times, and as a result, I was quite exhausted by the time we reached the summit. We met one of the foresters in the woods, Mr Kemajl Kadriu, who explained about the management of the predominately beech forest with Hornbeam, Oak and Chestnut. It was interesting to see how the foresters all wore neat uniforms despite the heat and humidity in the woods. The biggest issue they seem to face, other than the bears, is aggressive illegal tree fellers, and it is not uncommon for foresters to be targeted quite violently. Forestry in Kosovo and the Balkans in general is not regarded as a significant career, and as a result, staff are in short supply and often paid off to stay away from certain parts of the



*Photo 1.8 Coppiced Beech*

woodland. The beech forest we saw was around 20 years old, which ties it into the end of the Kosovo War in 1999 that saw much of the woodland areas flattened or destroyed. Despite this, Kosovo now has 45% woodland cover, but much of it is Beech / Oak / Hornbeam / Chestnut scrub in a post-war recovery phase.

### *Agroforestry*

The return trip down the mountain was less eventful, and we called into an agroforestry farm at the foot of the hills. A near-perfect Massey Ferguson 135 tractor was still being used to haul thinnings, walnuts and general material around the farm. The owner was very proud of the British machine he had, and we toasted its continued good health with several homemade Rakias (Plum Brandy). Walnut trees had been planted recently, and they will produce saleable nuts within three years to compliment the orchards of apple, pear and plum. Cattle and sheep were enjoying the shade, and various hens were furiously pecking at whatever was dropped. It was a real rural treat to see so much going on in a relatively small area and great to know this is repeated all over the country.



*Photo 1.9 Walnut Trees*



*Photo 1.10 Kosovo Forests*

### *School Tree Planting*

Kosovo does not have an urban forestry programme or department. As a result, communities mainly rely on philanthropic activities to have street trees and community tree planting. Kosovan forests are generally not places for public recreation, as they are found on steep mountain sides. The agricultural plains are used for farming or viticulture, which makes the urban tree a very important addition to the everyday lives of the Kosovars. As a result, my company, High Grains Forestry, and Kosovo Tree Council had arranged to supply and plant 12 semi-mature *Platanus orientalis* at the local Professional High School in Suhareka.



*Photo 1.11 School Tree Planting Team*

We were welcomed by the school director and some of the ecology students, who impressed me with their level of English and their enthusiastic knowledge of tree biology. The school was relatively new and sited in an industrial estate outside of the town. As a result, there were few trees in the vicinity, and efforts had been made over the years to establish some for shade and landscaping. The southern wall of the school took the brunt of the summer sun, making the rooms very hot, and the plan was to site a row of trees adjacent to the classrooms to create future shade. The trees arrived from a nearby nursery at Peja, and to my great relief, they also had a mini digger. With lots of arm waving and pointing, the location of each tree was marked, and the digger got to work. I spoke with the students and arranged the backfilling and watering along with

fitting the support stakes. Despite the continuing dry weather during the trip, our tree planting day marked the beginning of some welcome rain, and as we left the school, the heavens opened. It was a fantastic morning, and thanks also go to NexGen Tree Shelters, who assisted with the cost of some of the trees.



Photo 1.12 Tree Planting

### *Final Thoughts*

Thanks again to the ICF for their support. This part of the Balkans is steeped in historical conflict, but the Serbian and Albanian people are very welcoming and keen to show visitors their country's traits. The food is excellent, and Rakia is even better. I am sure an international forestry tour taking in Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria would be a fascinating experience.