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Forests will play a crucial role globally in the next 300 years and beyond. Knowledge of sustainable forest management will be in high demand as forests are one of the main renewable natural resources available to humanity. Forests will be expected to help mitigate climate change, protect soil and water, provide clean air, conserve biodiversity and produce wood fibre and other products.

Thus, in 2313 we expect that:

Natural forests will still exist but, to a great extent, climax forest types, such as primary rainforests, will have disappeared, due mainly to shorter forest cycles caused by increased (climate-related) disturbance. They will mostly be in protected areas, with minimal timber harvesting, and will provide important ecosystem services.

Planted and semi-natural forests, as readily renewable natural resources, will be providing huge quantities of wood and wood-based fibre. Urban forests will be providing recreational and spiritual benefits and serving as climate buffers.

Overall, the forest area will have increased to about 5 billion hectares, although those forests will have less biomass per unit area than natural forests today. The life cycles of forests and tree species will become shorter and they will be subjected to a constant dynamic of climatic and biotic disturbances.

Forest governance, at the regional and global levels, will still be a key issue. The redistribution of ownership and better defined rights and responsibilities will increase efforts to protect, invest in and use forest resources wisely.

This scenario is an optimistic one (although some elements, such as the loss of primary forests, are depressing), but it is not an impossible or even an improbable one. It is likely that the oak tree on the Swiss plateau, the Sipo tree in northern Congo and the fir tree in western Siberia will not see the beginning of the twenty-fourth century, but forests — albeit different to today's — will have spread.

Humanity's future will depend in large measure on how it deals with its forests. Today's and tomorrow's foresters have much work to do.

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