Forest Storytelling and Engagement for Change

A toolkit for effective stakeholder engagement and communication

SUPERB
Upscaling Forest Restoration

Funded by
the European Union

SUPERB
Upscaling Forest Restoration

This is an outcome
from the SUPERB project.

A toolkit to create stories that inspire forest ecosystem restoration and deepen community connection.

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Introduction

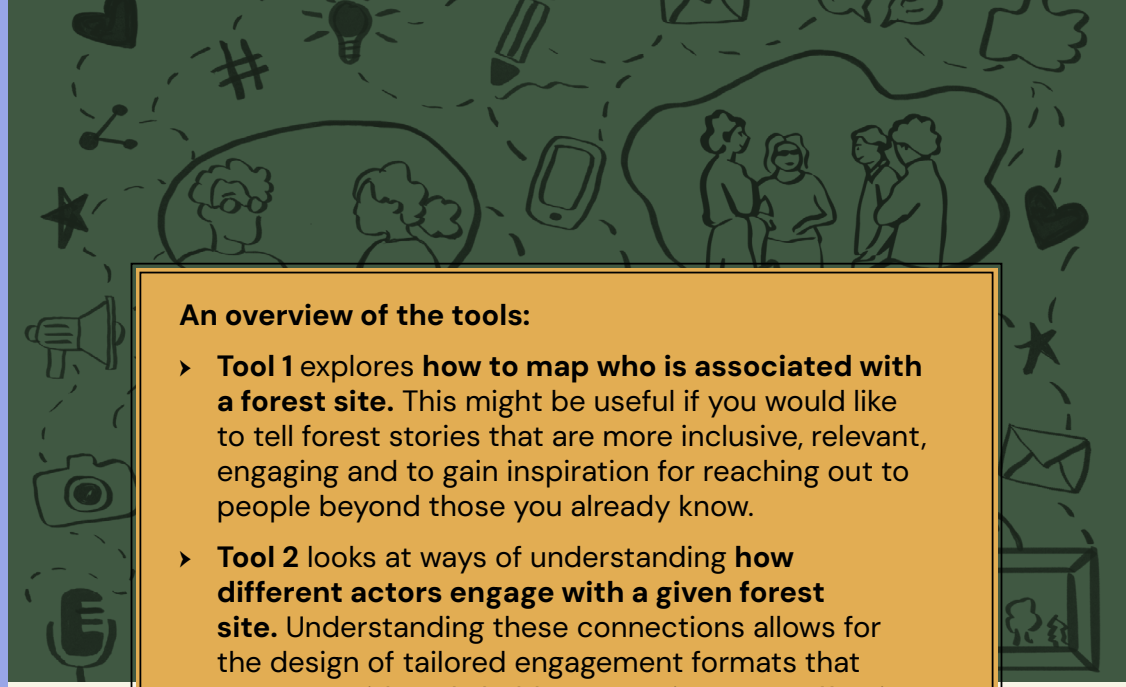
How can forest stories make a difference in forest restoration work? Who and what do forest stories include, and how does this shape action towards different kinds of forest futures?

Forest Storytelling and Engagement for Change offers a range of practical tools and starting points to support those living and working with forests to map which kinds of stories are told and to explore how to tell stories that can make a difference.

This guide builds on our research and engagement activities as part of the EU Green Deal project SUPERB to upscale ecosystem restoration across Europe, including in 12 demonstration areas in 12 countries. As part of this project we have developed approaches for mapping forest stories, understanding the contexts of forest restoration, and seeing how stories can help to deepen and broaden participation around restoration efforts.

The following pages provide activities and advice to those with an interest in the role of stories in shaping forests – whether you are a **policy-maker** interested in understanding who and what might be missing from your plans, a **forest practitioner** interested in how people are engaging with your site, or a **community group** interested in what kinds of stories there are about forests in your area.

Picture by Sandra Gabriel from Pixabay



An overview of the tools:

- **Tool 1** explores **how to map who is associated with a forest site.** This might be useful if you would like to tell forest stories that are more inclusive, relevant, engaging and to gain inspiration for reaching out to people beyond those you already know.
- **Tool 2** looks at ways of understanding **how different actors engage with a given forest site.** Understanding these connections allows for the design of tailored engagement formats that resonate with stakeholders, ensuring more effective participation.
- **Tool 3** focuses on **how to develop a forest story** by considering its purpose, how it can resonate, and which format and medium is most appropriate. It provides different tips and examples from the SUPERB project and beyond.
- **Tool 4** explores the **transformative power of storytelling in forest restoration** including how to create connections, build community, and change cultures. It provides some inspiration for actions you could take to change systems that affect forests.
- **Tool 5** examines approaches for **engaging diverse stakeholders and overcoming conflicts.** It looks at ways to spark meaningful discussions, to support collaborative storytelling and to address complex conflicts.

> It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.
>
> – Donna J. Haraway, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene

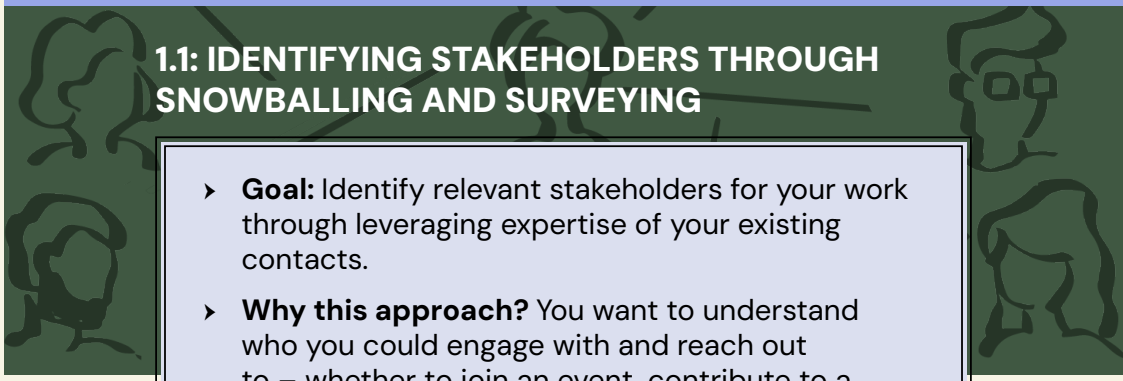
"How can stories make a difference?"

Stories have evolved with us for millennia, shaping our cultures, relationships and systems. They are an essential part of how we create meaning and make sense of the world around us. Scientists say that humans are wired for telling and listening to stories. Stories can shape what we value, what we believe and what we do.[1]

Why does this matter for those who want to support healthy and resilient forests? Stories can help to connect people, surface shared values and overcome differences. They may support systems change through building connections and empathy with other perspectives, shifting mindsets, and supporting people to see new possibilities and understand the world in different ways.[2] In the context of forest restoration they may help not only to scale up engagement, but also to deepen it.[3]

[1] For more, see Saltmarshe, 2018.
[2] For more, see Snow et al., 2021, p.15.
[3] For more, see Tsubaki, 2023.

Tool 1: Mapping forest stakeholders



1.1: IDENTIFYING STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH SNOWBALLING AND SURVEYING

- **Goal:** Identify relevant stakeholders for your work through leveraging expertise of your existing contacts.
- **Why this approach?** You want to understand who you could engage with and reach out to – whether to join an event, contribute to a discussion, or include in local activities. You can do this through tapping into the expertise of your existing contacts.
- **For who is this tool for?** Forest practitioners, researchers, forest owners, policy-makers, NGOs, community groups.

Step-by-step how-to:

- One way to identify relevant people is to use the 'snowball approach', also called 'network sampling'. You first contact the stakeholders you are familiar with and ask them for names of people they'd recommend to engage with. You contact those people and repeat the process. You can do this in-person, by phone or email.
- You can also try 'stakeholder mapping'. This involves deciding on criteria for who you are mapping, then making a list of all relevant people and groups that meet your criteria. You can start the mapping with your existing network of stakeholders and categorise them based on e.g. their influence, their profession or their likely engagement.

1.2: IDENTIFYING STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH WEB AND SOCIAL MEDIA

- **Goal:** Identify relevant stakeholders for your work through online mapping.
- **Why this approach?** This method may give a different picture of stakeholders compared to starting with your existing contacts as shown above. By mapping online engagement you may discover groups who are unexpected or overlooked.
- **For who is this tool for?** Researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, policy-makers, community groups.

Step-by-step how-to:

This process involves two parts/steps:

1. **Finding online materials** such as search engine results and social media posts related to your forest site.
2. **Identifying potential stakeholders** from these materials.

Part 1: Finding online materials

- Create a list of names your forest site is known by in different contexts or by different groups.
  - Tip: When typing these names in your browser/ search engine, you can use search suggestions or autocomplete features to discover additional names.
- Search for these names across platforms like search engines and social media to see who is engaging with them.
  - Tip: Try searching for variations of place name and their combinations to explore how different groups might be engaged with them.
  - Tip: Use advanced search operators to refine your search if multiple places share the same name (see example below).[4]
  - You can take steps to avoid personalised results by using incognito mode, a separate browser profile or a dedicated research browser.[5]
  - Tip: Adapt searches to each platform (e.g. search for hashtags on Instagram).
- Experiment with different search terms and refine based on relevance.
- Save your results by: saving the page ("file" > "save as"); by copying and pasting the results into a document; by printing the page to a PDF; or by taking a full page screenshot.[6]

[4] For more, see *Refine Google searches*, n.d..
[5] For more, see Public Data Lab, n.d..
[6] For more, see *Go Full Page*, n.d..

Example: Finding online materials

Using Google's related search feature, we found almost two hundred place names associated with the SUPERB demonstration area in Scotland[7].

Here is an example of a query we used in SUPERB for the forest site in Scotland:

> (queen elizabeth forest park) OR QEFP OR (Loch Lomond) OR (Loch Ard) OR (Loch Lubnaig) OR (Achray Forest) OR (Loch Achray) OR Arrochar OR Argyll OR Strathyre OR Trossachs OR (Loch Dubh)

Here is an example of using an advanced operator in Google Search (using a minus sign to exclude mentions of Australia or Australian web domains (.au) in a query about Loch Ard:

[7] For more, see *195 forest names*, n.d..

Part 2: Identifying potential stakeholders

- Copy search results into a spreadsheet (e.g. Excel, Google Sheets, OpenOffice Calc). Online tools like Google Sheets can be useful for collaborative editing.
  - Tip: Include links to each result, names of people, groups, or organisations mentioned, and other relevant details from the platform (e.g. likes on a social media post).
- Copy and classify relevant actors (e.g., individuals, groups, initiatives) in a new sheet.
- Pay attention to which kinds of actors you notice and any that might be missing.
- If you do this in a team, there may be different views on how to classify results. Take this as an opportunity to discuss and reflect on different ways of grouping actors and how this might make a difference in storytelling and engagement activities.
- Before sharing with externals you may wish to anonymise individual accounts.

Example: Identifying stakeholders

Here is an example of listing and classifying users who tweet about a forest restoration site in the Fagaras Mountains, Romania. As shown below, some of the users have been anonymized. When working with web and social media data it is important to take privacy into consideration.

Account name	No. tweets	Classification
Jurnalul de Arges	118	local/regional traditional media
[anonymised]	83	civil society professional
licitatii.app	81	tender app
[anonymised]	46	personal account

Tool 2: Learning how stakeholders engage with a forest site

2.1: EXPLORING ENGAGEMENT THROUGH SURVEYING AND WORKSHOPS

- **Goal:** Learn about how communities and local stakeholders are engaging with your forest site through surveying and workshops.
- **Why this approach?** Knowing what people see and feel can help you to create materials, stories and activities which are relevant to them. Once you have understood how different actors perceive and are connected to a given forest site, you can design engagement and activity formats that are relevant and appropriate for them (see also Tool 4.3).
- **For who is this tool for?** Forest practitioners, researchers, forest owners, policy-makers, NGOs, community groups.

Step-by-step how-to: To find out how people around your forest site relate to it and engage with it, you first should be clear on what exactly you want to know from them: e.g. How do they feel about your project? How do they view and engage with the site? What do they hope the site will become?

Then, you should consider who you'd like answers from. You may consider who would be relevant to consult for each question. This may draw on mapping activities (as in Tool 1) to look at which target groups may be relevant but less engaged (e.g. school children, tourists, birdwatchers), and which formats would be most appropriate for engaging them.

If you are mainly interested in getting as much feedback as possible, you could consider a **'stakeholder survey'**. Besides contacting people you know, you could reach out to people through existing events and channels such as a weekly farmers market, schools or clubs. You could also set this up online, using a QR code and promote it widely via flyers and info boards. You can take the following steps when developing your survey:

- Define what you want to know from your stakeholders: expert knowledge, concerns or preferences?
- Based on your needs develop questions[8] you want to ask your stakeholders, and involve selected stakeholders in the survey design if possible to have a more targeted approach.
- Prepare the questions in a clear and respectful way, ask multiple-choice questions if possible, have a mix of open and closed questions to make the survey more engaging.
- Make sure to not make the survey longer than 10 minutes to avoid stakeholder fatigue.[9]
- Test your survey with selected stakeholder representatives: check length of survey completion, and relevance of questions.
- Launch the survey and promote it widely via social media, existing contacts and networks as well as relevant events.
- Consider incentivising survey completion, e.g. by offering a prize.

[8] For exemplary questions, see The Narratologist, n.d..
[9] For more guidance on how to tackle survey fatigue, see Bray, 2023.

Other ways to explore public perceptions include:

- Putting ads in local papers inviting people to share their stories via email or audio recording.
- Organising workshops, field visits and focus groups where people are invited to share and discuss their views.
- Collaborating with schools to set up science-art projects and engaging students in activities to imagine forest futures.

Here you can draw inspiration from many places. You can also start testing ideas within your own existing networks and develop approaches from there. Make sure to let people know what the aim of this engagement is and how the results will be used.

2.2: EXPLORING ENGAGEMENT WITH FOREST SITES THROUGH ONLINE MAPPING

- **Goal:** To learn about how different actors are engaging with your forest sites through online mapping.
- **Why this approach?** This method can reveal how different actors are engaging with a forest site through mapping online activities. It may provide different insights to exploring this through surveys and workshops (e.g. groups and activities you do not already know about).
- **For who is this tool for?** Researchers, NGOs, communications professionals.

Step-by-step how-to:

This process involves two parts

1. **Finding online materials** such as search engine results and social media posts related to your forest site.
2. **Exploring these materials** to understand how people engage with the site online.

Part 1: Finding online materials

- Follow the same steps as outlined in tool 1.2, Part 1, for locating relevant materials.

Part 2: Exploring these materials

- You could use a list of online pages, posts or actors (like those created in Tool 1) and document the different ways of engaging with the site that you can identify in these materials. What different kinds of forest themes, practices and activities can you find?
  - If working with a group, you could consider using a visual workspace tool such as Miro (https://miro.com/app/dashboard/) to organise and discuss results, or you could print out search results to annotate manually with sticky notes.
  - For videos (e.g., YouTube, TikTok), you can organise a group viewing session. After each video, participants can write down their thoughts on sticky notes, which can then be discussed collectively.
  - Tip: As well as looking at common themes and more prominent stories, make sure and note down what might be less prominent, missing or overlooked.

Examples:

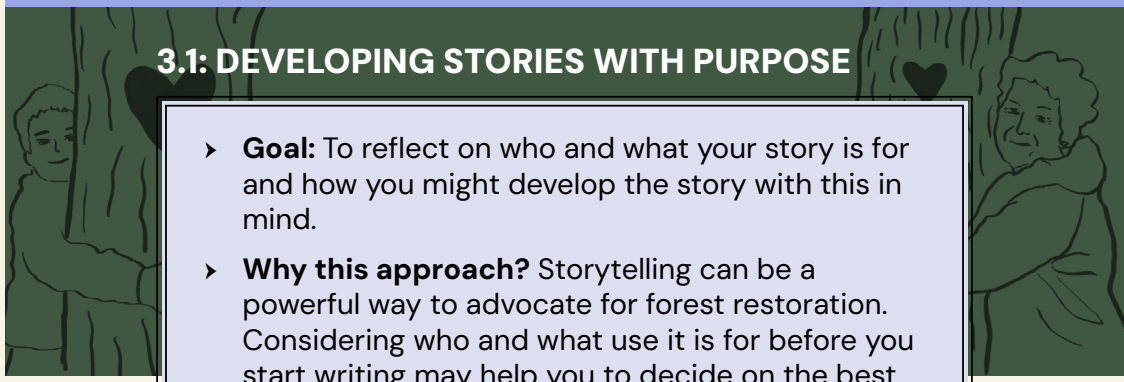
The table below is an example from SUPERB of the themes (in column D) we identified in Google search results related to Queen Elizabeth Forest Park in Scotland.[10] We found that different web pages address visitors as tourists and adventurers, hikers and holidayers, customers and conservationists. Looking at these pages we can identify different kinds of activities (e.g. cycling, trekking, foraging, photography) and different ways the site is experienced and presented (e.g. retreat, exercise spot, scenic landscape, night camping location).

url	name	codes	comments
https://forestryandland.gov.scot/visit/queen-elizabeth-forest-park	Queen Elizabeth Forest Park - Forestry and Land Scotland	forestry | scotland | government | lochs | trails | enjoy | hiking | horses | magic | wildlife | Aberfoyle |	
https://forestryandland.gov.scot/visit/queen-elizabeth-forest-park	Queen Elizabeth Forest Park - Forestry and Land Scotland	forestry | scotland | government | lochs | trails | enjoy | biking | horses | magic | wildlife | Aberfoyle |	
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_Elizabeth_Forest_Park	Queen Elizabeth Forest Park - Wikipedia	Wikipedia | Scotland | mountains | Queen Elizabeth | historires | reference | hills | lochs | Loch Ard, Lo	
https://www.forestholidays.co.uk/holiday-parks/queen-elizabeth-forest-park	Queen Elizabeth Forest Park, Scotland: A Guide | Visitor Cent	Scotland | beautiful | nature | forest fun | histories | reference | explore | guide | guide book | cycle | h	
https://forestryandland.gov.scot/visit/loch-ard	Loch Ard - Forestry and Land Scotland	Loch Ard | trails | maps | water | woodland | trail | views | scenery | sculpture	
https://forestryandland.gov.scot/visit/the-lodge	The Lodge Forest Visitor Centre - Forestry and Land Scotland	cafe | toilet | visitor centre | hammock | trails | wildlife | ospreys | animals | Go Ape | entertaining | sig	
https://forestryandland.gov.scot/visit/three-lochs-forest-drive	Queen Elizabeth Forest Park - Forestry and Land Scotland	map | trail | guide | PDF | leaflet | photos | Loch Ard | The Lodge | visitor centre | Three Lochs Forest	
https://www.visitscotland.com/info/towns-villages/aberfoyle	Queen Elizabeth Forest Park, Aberfoyle - VisitScotland	scenery | wildlife | mountains | moorland | views | magnificent | CCTV | wildlife | visitor centre | cyclin	
https://www.forestholidays.co.uk/holiday-parks/scotland/queen-elizabeth-forest-park	Queen Elizabeth Forest Park, Scotland: A Guide | Visitor Cent	holidays | tourism | views | The Lodge | Aberfoyle | park | cafe | cycling | driving | Three Lochs Drive	
https://www.tripcanny.com/queen-elizabeth-forest-park-the-trossachs	Queen Elizabeth Forest Park - The Trossachs	map | trail | guide | PDF | leaflet | photos | Loch Ard | The Lodge | visitor centre | Three Lochs Forest	
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_Elizabeth_Forest_Park	Queen Elizabeth Forest Park - Wikipedia	Wikipedia | Scotland | mountains | Queen Elizabeth | historires | reference | hills | lochs | Loch Ard, Lo	
https://www.forestryandland.gov.scot/news/climate-ready-forestry-at-queen-elizabeth-forest-park	Climate Ready Forestry at Queen Elizabeth Forest Park	climate change | workshop | event | presentations | woodland | productive forest | forest | Trossachs	

Online materials gathered from the web and social media can be examined in groups. Below is an example from a project where a visual workspace was used to collaboratively explore and organise different kinds of scenes in videos related to one of the SUPERB demo sites in Scotland.[11]

[10] For more, see Colombo & Gray, 2024.
[11] This was developed as part of the Forestscapes project. For more, see *Forestscapes*, n.d..

Tool 3: Developing engaging forest stories



3.1: DEVELOPING STORIES WITH PURPOSE

- **Goal:** To reflect on who and what your story is for and how you might develop the story with this in mind.
- **Why this approach?** Storytelling can be a powerful way to advocate for forest restoration. Considering who and what use it is for before you start writing may help you to decide on the best format, style, tone and key messages.
- **For who is this tool for?** Forest practitioners, researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, forest owners, policymakers, and community groups.

Step-by-step how-to:

Before developing your stories, it is important to sit down and think about what goal you want to achieve with the story you aim to tell. Of course, your story can serve several goals, but be sure to distinguish between your primary and secondary goals, and focus on the main message you want to convey. Try writing down the purpose of your forest story (whether individually or in groups).

Below are some examples of goals that you could consider in your storytelling:

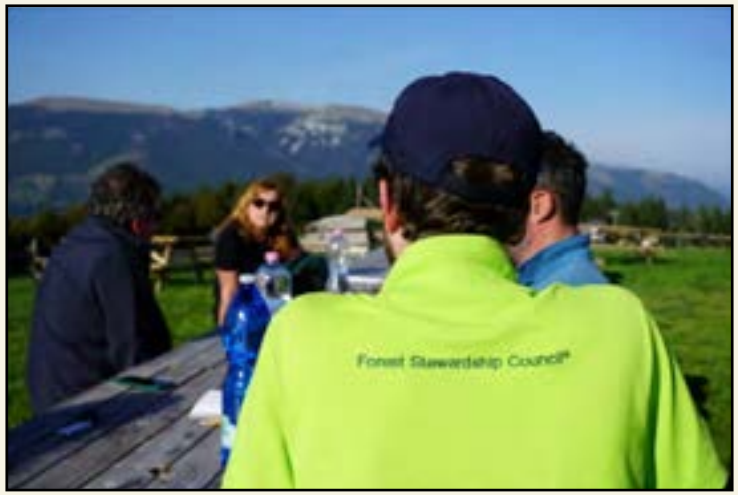
- To share a personal story of what it is like to be the person involved in forest restoration: Foresters, in particular, feel often left out in media coverage and struggle to find a way to voice their perspectives to the world. If this is your goal, you might want to focus on exploring the best channels to share these perspectives, e.g. specialised media, social media or a blog. You may consider personalising your story, to share your own experiences, hopes, and personal connections to forests.
- To influence policy decision-making: If you are thinking of shaping the policy-making process, a single story or message on a blog or YouTube won't be so effective. Instead, you want to learn how advocacy campaigns are run by NGOs. See Tool 4.2 to explore how NGOs and forest communities have run collaborative social media campaigns.

Examples:

Below is an example from SUPERB's Restoration Stories. The goal here was to share the personal experiences of people involved in restoration work after the Vaia Storm. By using first hand accounts with vivid imagery, the stories highlight emotional and communal ties to local forests.

"The wind arrived up here and found woods all of the same species and age," explained Marco Pellegrini, forestry technician in charge of the Asiago Oltre Vaia project. "The intense rains of the previous days then loosened the ground. It was like bowling; the trees fell like skittles."

Diego Rigoni, councilor for forestry heritage of the Municipality of Asiago at the time of the storm, agreed. "For the local community it was a very hard blow. Our lives have always been inextricably linked with those of our forests. In the days following the storm the surrounding area resembled the scenario of death and destruction left by the Great War. For many of us, it was a very bad return to the past."



Text and photos by Alberto Pauletto, *The Vaia storm five years later – lessons for forests and people*[12]

3.2: MAKING FOREST STORIES RELATABLE

- **Goal:** To develop stories which resonate more deeply with those they address.
- **Why this approach?** Forests are complex. Forest stories need to find a balance between conveying this complexity and being relatable to those they are for, if they are to be accessible and to make a difference.
- **For who is this tool for?** Forest practitioners, researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, forest owners, policymakers, and community groups.

Step-by-step how-to:

Find or write down a short story about a forest site. This may include what it is, where it is, who and what is connected to it, and how its future might unfold.

How can you make this story relatable? You could consider:

- Incorporating everyday activities, experiences or concerns which might help people relate to your story.
- Making stories accessible and inclusive. For example, you might look at how those you are engaging with may experience and describe things - and whether you could use similar terms.
- The role of feelings as well as facts in engaging with stories about your site.
- Frictions, troubles and difficulties as well as solutions in forest work.
- How people might see themselves in your forest story.
- Reducing jargon and complex scientific and technical terms.
- Interactive storytelling methods[13]: Whether it is games or walks in the forest, there are many ways of making stories non-linear, dynamic and engaging. You can find inspiration for different storytelling formats below (Tool 4).
- Don't be afraid to challenge dominant stories. Good stories do not need to connect or build upon pre-existing ones. Tell the story that matters, even if it feels uncomfortable.

Example:

This example highlights biodiversity loss in a way which is grounded in personal relationships, memories and experiences.

> *"A few weeks ago, I visited my son who is studying in Scotland. He took me for a walk in the Cairngorns, the UK's largest National Park, which is a fantastic area. Only afterwards, I realised what we have lost in our densely populated Netherlands: the decreased diversity in landscapes, gradients and biodiversity became painfully apparent. For instance, in Scotland, I have seen lichens with the size of a fist, at the end of the branches of oaks. I have never seen that in my home country. Most likely this is due to air pollution as lichens are very sensitive to this. I suppose I do not have to remind you of the atmospheric nitrogen concentrations in the Netherlands, nor of the acidic rain in the past."*

[13] For more, see Merabti et al., 2008.

Text and photo by Maaike de Graaf
Forests: why "doing nothing" can't be the cure[14]

[14] For more, see de Graaf, 2023.

3.3: EXPLORING DIFFERENT FOREST STORYTELLING FORMATS

- **Goal:** To consider which format and medium might be most appropriate for your story.
- **Why this approach?** Stories can be told in different ways and can take many forms. Looking at a range of formats and media for inspiration may help you to identify which approach is the best fit for your story.
- **For who is this tool for?** Forest practitioners, researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, forest owners, policymakers, and community groups.

Step-by-step how-to:

- Following the steps and suggestions above, find or write down a short story about a forest site. This may include what it is, where it is, who and what is connected to it, and how its future might unfold.
- Consider different ways you could tell this story - through different formats and media. You could do this individually or in groups. For inspiration you might look at how stories are told in comics, photos, infographics, animations, videos, speeches, fiction, games, artworks, tours or memes. Depending on your goal and your resources, you can choose different formats for your story. In the table below, you can find some examples for inspirations.

- You can also consider taking a user-centred approach when deciding on your story format. Observe and learn how your target group interacts with various communication outputs. If you have direct access to the target group, interview or survey them to know their preferred platforms and channels. Alternatively, A/B testing could be applied if you have examples to show.
- No matter which format you choose, please keep in mind that story should always be the center, and the different formats of visuals should just serve as tools to make your story simple, memorable, and appealing.

Visual format	How it can be used to tell the story	Example ideas
Graphs	- Show story of change: Use graphs to tell the story of how the forest has grown or how carbon sequestration has improved since the project began.	- A line graph showing the gradual increase in tree cover year by year, narrated to explain key milestones. - A bar chart comparing wildlife species population before and after restoration.
Diagrams	- Guide the viewer through the steps of restoration, like a roadmap to recovery. - Illustrate the interconnected roles of different species and community efforts.	- A flowchart showing how deforested land becomes restored step by step. - An ecosystem web diagram highlighting how reintroducing one species (e.g., a bird) impacts others.
Images	- Tell stories of transformation through powerful before-and-after imagery. - Use emotive photos to show the impact of restoration on wildlife and communities.	- A series of before-and-after photos of a barren field turning into a lush forest. - Emotional close-ups of community members planting trees or wildlife returning to the area.
Videos	- Create a story arc showing the entire journey of the restoration, from start to flourishing forest. - Highlight human involvement, challenges, and successes.	- A time-lapse video showing forest recovery over months or years. - A documentary style video where the project team explains key events, challenges, and milestones.
Info-graphics	- Tell the story at a glance by combining key stats and progress milestones into a single visual. - Break down the restoration timeline with visuals that are easy to follow.	- An infographic timeline with icons and stats showing the steps from deforestation to a thriving ecosystem. - Simple, colorful icons representing tree planting progress, species reintroduction, and carbon sequestration.

Visual format	How it can be used to tell the story	Example ideas
Comics	o Use characters or animals to tell the restoration story in a fun and engaging way, making it more relatable. o Break down the restoration process into digestible episodes.	o A comic strip showing a forest animal returning home as the forest is restored, with each panel showing a new stage of the forest's recovery. o A volunteer character explaining each step of tree planting, with humor and emotion.

Examples:

Personal stories can be inspiring. For example, at SUPERB's Danish demo site in Thy, we interviewed students who were invited to gain hands-on experience in the field and asked them what they had learned about biodiversity through the project. The video clips were then edited into a 5-minute video and uploaded to social media platforms[15]. This approach has been well received and encouraged more participatory activities.

[15] For more, see European Forest Institute, 2024.

Forest walks or virtual tours can be used creatively to tell stories about forest restoration. For example, Eternal Forest works to establish protected forest sanctuaries as living artworks, combining art, science, and community collaboration to promote ecosystem regeneration, biodiversity, and a deeper connection with these sites.[16]

Eternal Forest Sanctuary Experience, Evgenia Emets, 2019, Bienal de Coruche

Another example of a collaborative storytelling format is the Forest Listening Rooms, a project in Wayne National Forest, Appalachian Ohio (USA) which gathers people to walk and listen to a combination of forest sounds, oral histories and archival recordings, before inviting participants to share their own experiences, hopes and fears.[17]

[16] For more, see Eternal Forest, n.d..
[17] For more, see *Forest Listening Rooms*, n.d. and *Ways of Listening to Forests*, n.d..

If you want to make your relatively long story more educational and fun, comics or animations can be a great idea. Forest Europe has created a comic titled *Spirit of the Forest* (https://foresteurope.org/comic/) to explain why forest management is needed to restore forests. By following the journey of the fictional characters in the comic, readers who may not have experience with forest management or restoration will gain a deeper understanding of the concept and find it more relatable.

"Spirit of the Forest - An Animated Journey" - Comic cover[18]

[18] See European Forest Institute/Forest Europe, n.d..

Tool 4: Telling stories and inspiring others

4.1: CONSIDERING HOW STORIES CAN CHANGE SYSTEMS

- **Goal:** To think about how stories you tell could change systems that affect your forest site.
- **Why this approach?** Stories are a part of the world, and can help to change the systems around us. This tool invites you to consider how the stories you tell could bring people together, build new stories, and ignite change.[19]
- **For who is this tool for?** Forest practitioners, researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, forest owners, policymakers, community groups and journalists.

Step-by-step how-to:

A system change does not happen overnight. It is important to start small and form a community of people with similar perspectives so that you can collaboratively develop new stories together. Here is one way to approach this:

- Look at the story as a "process" instead of an output.
- Start with a story that you have or would like to tell.
- Identify who might share a similar perspective.
- Speak with them and discover their stories.

[19] The following steps are inspired by the work of anthropologist Ella Saltmarshe. See the background on her work, stories as light, glue and web in the example.

- Seek ways to tell their stories through/with your stories .
- Keep exploring “who else” might share similar perspectives to continue building (See 4.3 and Tool 5 for the detailed steps you can take beyond this general approach).

Example:

For anthropologist Ella Saltmarshe, storytelling and stories can support profound shifts in culture and systems – particularly through serving, metaphorically, as ‘light’, ‘glue’ or ‘web’:

> *“Story has many different qualities that make it useful for the work of systems change. It’s a direct route to our emotions, and therefore important to decision-making. It creates meaning out of patterns. It coheres communities. It engenders empathy across difference. It enables the possibility to feel probable in ways our rational minds can’t comprehend. When it comes to changing the values, mindsets, rules, and goals of a system, story is foundational.”*[20]

Illustration by Irene Palacio

[20] For more, see Saltmarshe, 2018.

- Story as ‘light’ illustrates the capacity of stories to showcase and reveal patterns, frameworks and perspectives from our past, present, and future – helping us to learn from what has happened, as well as to imagine different futures.
- Story as ‘glue’ speaks to the power of storytelling to connect dots and build community, particularly through its capacities to evoke empathy and a sense of coherence. Saltmarshe writes that stories ”enable people to connect across differences and to generate narratives that hold together groups, organisations, and movements”.
- Finally, story as ‘web’ showcases how stories can be used to “reauthor the web of narratives we live in”. This means that stories can directly be used to change narratives at the level of individuals, cultures and myths. The transformative power of stories seen as web lies in its capacity to shift the ways in which we speak, see and frame the issues we care about, as well as the narratives that influence our perspectives and worldviews that shape what we do.[21]

[21] For more, see Saltmarshe, 2018.

4.2: SHARING FOREST STORIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA WITH HASHTAG CAMPAIGNS

- **Goal:** To explore how inviting others to share stories and experiences on social media could support action in relation to your site.
- **Why this approach?** You may wish to see how you could support others to share stories and experiences related to forest sites or issues you are working on. One way to do this is through hashtag campaigns and similar initiatives on social media.
- **For who is this tool for?** Researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, practitioners, forest owners, policymakers, (potentially) journalists.

Step-by-step how-to:

Have a go at writing a plan for a social media hashtag campaign to encourage others to share their stories. You may not have the resources to run a big hashtag campaign but this exercise might help you to think about how you could invite others to share stories and experiences online. You may consider:

- Your vision, mission, goals and the change you hope these stories could contribute to.
- What kinds of groups could join? (You could rank them from the most to the least committed)
- What hashtags could you use? Develop a few options by looking up their availability on different platforms and other campaigns. Ask whether the wording is aligned with your vision, mission, and goals.
- Who would you approach first and who would you reach out to later?
- What kinds of materials could you share to encourage others to share stories?
- How might you prepare the launch? How might you time it (e.g. to coincide with international days, during significant news events)?

Examples:

To advocate for stronger EU laws against deforestation, WWF has collaborated with 220 NGOs in their multi-year global hashtag campaign *#Together 4 Forests*, influencing EU decisions. On a smaller scale, the Institute of Chartered Foresters in the UK launched the *#ILookLikeAForester* campaign on International Women's Day to address the gender bias that often portrays foresters as male. This initiative successfully connected many women in the forestry sector who share similar experiences.

Source: https://together4forests.eu/

4.3: BUILDING CONNECTIONS TO AMPLIFY YOUR STORY'S IMPACT

- **Goal:** To boost the impact of your story through building connections and engagement around it.
- **Why this approach?** Perhaps you have a story you would like to tell and you are interested in how you can engage people around it and see how it can lead to change. By identifying and leveraging key local communities, networks, events, media outlets and influencers, you can help your story reach a broader audience and make a bigger difference.
- **For who is this tool for?** Forest practitioners, researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, forest owners, policymakers, and community groups.

Step-by-step how-to:

Below are some steps that may help you to engage with local networks and promote your project:

1. **Identify relevant local networks:** Local networks, such as community organisations, environmental groups, and educational institutions, can play a crucial role in spreading your restoration message. Such groups may have many local connections, making them valuable partners for sharing your story.

   Some options are:

   - Researching local environmental and conservation groups that align with your project goals.
   - Connecting with schools, universities, or local research institutions that may have an interest in forest ecosystems.
   - Reaching out to local government agencies or policy-makers that focus on sustainability and environmental protection.

2. **Attend or organise relevant events:** Events offer a direct way to engage with relevant groups. Consider both attending and organising events that focus on environmental and forest-related issues, such as:
   - exhibitions, fairs, and festivals;
   - workshops and talks;
   - nature walks or site tours;

3. **Identify media outlets and social media channels:** Identifying key local media outlets and social media platforms will allow you to reach a diverse audience. Below are some steps for you to consider:
   - Local newspapers and radio stations 🗞️: Many community members still rely on local news for information. Reach out to journalists or radio hosts who cover environmental issues, and offer to provide them with stories or updates on your project.
   - Online publications and blogs 📝: Explore local or regional websites that focus on environmental conservation or community development. You can pitch articles and pictures that highlight the importance of forest restoration in your area.
   - Social media channels 📱: Choose platforms based on your target audience. It is best to check which social media platforms are used by who in your country/region. Facebook and Instagram might be ideal for reaching a broad local audience in some countries, while LinkedIn could help you connect with policymakers and environmental professionals.

4. Collaborate with influencers and local advocates

Consider the following:

- Community leaders 👫: Engaging local leaders or well-known figures within the community can provide credibility and attract attention to your restoration efforts.
- Partnerships with NGOs and environmental organisations 🌱: Partner with larger environmental organisations to gain access to their established networks and platforms. These organisations often have a broad reach and can help spread your story through their communication channels.
- Environmental influencers 😎: You can use online social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok or X to seek out local influencers who focus on sustainability and nature conservation. They can help you reach a wider online audience through posts, videos, or stories that promote your project.

It is worth noting that broadening and deepening your engagement with various groups may surface disagreements or tensions around your story or your plans (see Tool 5 on approaches to dealing with conflict).

Tool 5: Stakeholder engagement and transformation strategies

5.1: BROADENING AND DIVERSIFYING ENGAGEMENT

- **Goal:** To take meaningful steps to broaden and diversify engagement around your site.
- **Why this approach?** You probably know who is already well engaged and well represented in relation to your site, whether from your own experiences or mapping activities. How could you take steps to reach out to those who are less well-engaged, under-represented or marginalised? There are steps you can take to connect with them and include them in your engagement plans and forest stories.
- **For who is this tool for?** Researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, practitioners, forest owners, and policymakers.

Step-by-step how-to:

Drawing on mapping activities (Tool 1) - have you identified groups who are less well represented or who could be better included in your site? If so you could start by reaching out to them to understand how to make your site and its stories more inclusive. You could consider organising a workshop or focus group, and compensating participants for their time and travel.

You could also consider reaching out to local groups, services and institutions to understand how to improve access and inclusion, as well as learning from other initiatives and resources (see below). You may also consider looking into stories and histories of marginalised communities who have a relation to your site.

Examples:

For examples of initiatives which aim to support access, inclusion and diversity at forest sites, see:

- Queer Out Here, which advocates for "inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in the outdoors": https://www.queerouthere.co.uk/
- Black Girls Hike, which "provides a safe space for Black women to explore the outdoors": https://www.bghuk.com/
- UN Tourism guide on "Accessibility and inclusive tourism development in nature areas – Compendium of Best Practices"
- Case studies on "Access to Nature for Persons with Disabilities" in Sweden.[22]
- Review paper on "Accessible nature beyond city limits".
- Natural England reports and case studies on "outdoors for all".[23]
- Feminist Bird Club - dedicated to "make birding and the outdoors inclusive and affirming to people who may not have safe access to it": https://www.feministbirdclub.org/
- ESEA Outdoors UK - promoting East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) "representation, inclusion and diversity in the outdoors": https://eseaoutdoorsuk.carrd.co/

[22] For more, see Wall-Reinius et al., 2022.
[23] For more, see *Outdoors for all*, n.d..

5.2: CULTIVATING STORYTELLING COMMUNITIES

- **Goal:** To support communities of people who may surface and share stories related to your site.
- **Why this approach?** As well as telling your own stories about a forest site, you may reach out to and build connections amongst others who may create or share stories. Building such relationships can help to inspire stories and inspire action.
- **For who is this tool for?** Forest practitioners, researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, forest owners, policymakers, schools, universities, and community groups.

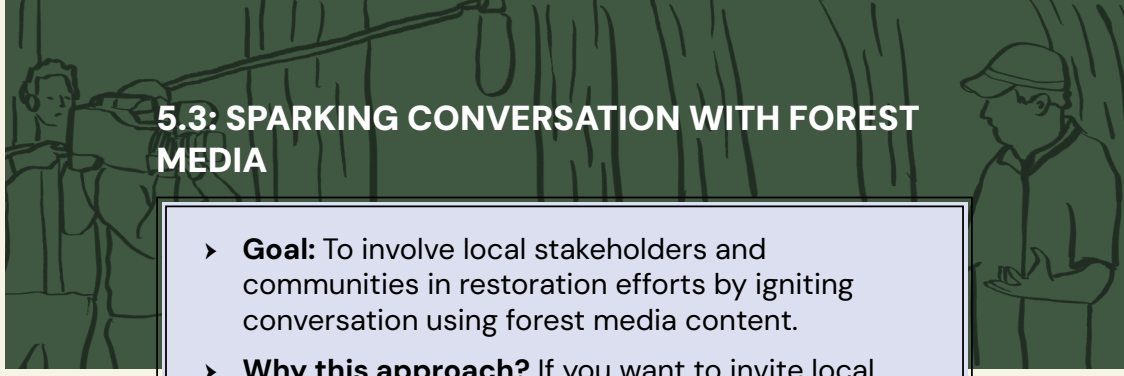
Step-by-step how-to:

- Consider who might be interested in telling stories related to your site. You might reach out to journalists, schools, or universities (such as creative writing, arts or humanities courses).
- Arrange meetings with those with an interest in telling stories about your site – whether one to one, in small groups or for organised workshops. You might take a walk in the forest together.
- Get to know them and their interests. Listen to what they are curious about and see how you could support them to tell and share stories about your site.
- Consider how you might help to share their stories with others - by highlighting them online or on location (e.g. printing articles, showcasing books, screening documentaries).

Example:

While Parco Nord Milano and the University of Milan were in charge of planting trees in the city of Milan to mitigate the heat island effect, absorb air pollution, and provide natural spaces for recreation, they became aware that they also needed to gather long-term support for their activities from local communities. To grow a restoration community along with new trees in Milan, the forestry practitioners and scientists decided to partner up with the NGO Demetra Onlus, an organisation working on social engagement in different fields. As a first step they planned to engage primary school children via environmental talks and plantation visits. An exciting task organized as part of these activities was a drawing session where the children responded to the question: how do we involve citizens in the new forest? Illustrative responses to this question provided inspiring material to develop stories around the forest restoration actions, and planted seeds for future collaboration.

Output from children's drawing session during the workshop



5.3: SPARKING CONVERSATION WITH FOREST MEDIA

- **Goal:** To involve local stakeholders and communities in restoration efforts by igniting conversation using forest media content.
- **Why this approach?** If you want to invite local stakeholders to a workshop to explain what you are planning to do in the next months and years, you need an intriguing starting point for a discussion. Forest-related content from social media and media articles can spark insightful conversations. Using a selection of media contents as a prompt for discussion can help participants find who share similar perspectives.
- **For who is this tool for?** Researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, practitioners, forest owners, and policymakers.

Step-by-step how-to:

- **Engage Local Communities** 👫**:** Focus on involving local communities near the forest site, as they play a crucial role in the long-term maintenance of the area.
- **Involve Stakeholders** 👨‍💼👩‍💼**:** Engage stakeholders from administration and nature conservation sectors to support the long-term success and potential scaling of your restoration efforts.
- **Facilitate Participant Discussions** 💬**:** If organising a meeting with participants of varied knowledge and engagement levels, consider an interactive exercise:
  - Present diverse social media content or journalistic articles related to the site.

* Ask participants for their thoughts on the material: whether they can relate, if it surprises them, or how they interpret it.
* As an alternative to the plenary discussion, participants can work in smaller groups to analyze the presented materials.

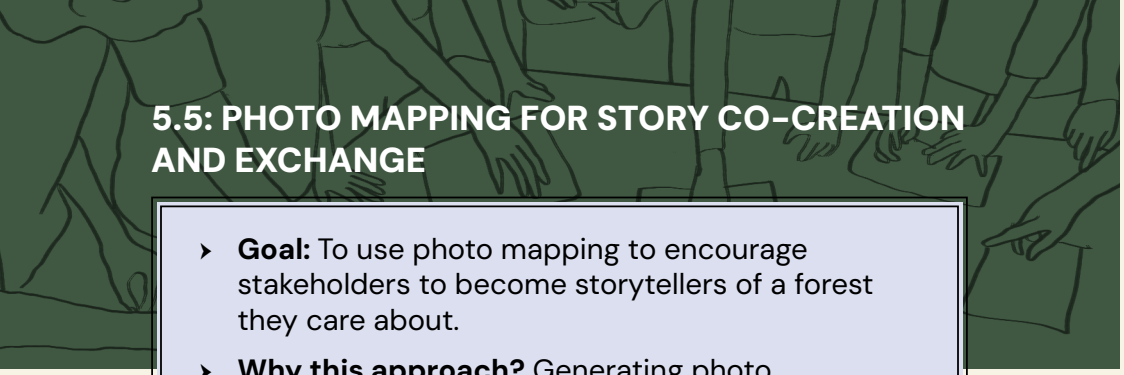
- **Introduce Restoration Plans 📋:** After the discussion, present your forest restoration plans and engage with stakeholders for feedback and input.
- **Organise a Joint Excursion 🚶 🚶 :** Follow up the session with a group excursion to the forest site. Use this opportunity to explain your plans in detail and showcase examples of your work. For more ideas on organizing excursions, check out Tool 5.4.

5.4: SUPPORTING ON-SITE FOREST CONVERSATIONS

- **Goal:** To engage through immersive learning and exchanges in the forest.
- **Why this approach?** It aims to foster understanding and conversations about forest restoration challenges, build trust and collaboration, and create a sense of connection to forests. By doing so, it encourages participants to contribute to and support future restoration efforts while addressing potential conflicting views in an open environment.
- **For who is this tool for?** Researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, practitioners, forest owners, and policymakers.

Step-by-step how-to:

- **Utilise excursions as an engagement tool:** Excursions are a valuable method for forest practitioners to exchange ideas. They can also be effective for engaging local stakeholders and community representatives.
- **Create an outdoor learning experience:** Taking stakeholders and community members to the forest allows them to experience restoration efforts firsthand while enjoying the fresh air and outdoor setting.
- **Showcase restoration challenges:** During the excursion, visit different sites that highlight restoration challenges, such as forest damage, soil conditions, biodiversity conservation and climate change adaptation. This may spark discussions on planned restoration and adaptation measures with participants.
- **Encourage conversation:** The relaxed, natural setting provides an opportunity for forest restoration planners to learn about participants' perceptions and engage in discussions about potentially conflicting objectives. This atmosphere can foster constructive exchanges on how to restore or conserve the land, even if consensus is not reached.
- **Foster a positive experience:** Ensure that participants enjoy their day in the forest, connecting with both the landscape and the group, which may increase their openness to further engagement.



5.5: PHOTO MAPPING FOR STORY CO-CREATION AND EXCHANGE

- **Goal:** To use photo mapping to encourage stakeholders to become storytellers of a forest they care about.
- **Why this approach?** Generating photo stories as a group can help build empathy and understanding between different stakeholder's values and perspectives. Being asked to take pictures of forest elements that capture their attention, concerns, and interests will help stakeholders to reflect on what really matters to them. This approach also changes our perspective on how stories can be produced; who can be a storyteller and what is needed for storytelling. It views storytelling as a participatory practice.
- **For who is this tool for?** Forest practitioners, researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, forest owners, policymakers, community groups and journalists.

Step-by-step how-to:

Part 1:

- Decide on your prompt(s) for your "photo-related research". For this, you should first clarify:
  - What topic do you want participants to reflect on, discuss and create a shared story about?
  - What do you want to know about your participants' lived experience in relation to the forest?
- Your prompt could focus on both "positive" and/or "negative" experiences related to your forest/restoration site. Example questions you could use:
  - What makes a forest a forest to you?
  - What do you care most about in this forest?
  - What surprises you about this forest site?
  - What are things this forest can teach us?
  - Where do you see conflict or challenges for this forest?
- Decide the forest area in which you want to conduct the research.
- Explain the exercise to your participants on where to take how many photos (e.g. 5-10) in relation to your prompt(s).
- Give them 20-30 minutes to take the photos.
- Make sure that when participants come back, they send you the photos so they can later on be used for the mapping.
- Have a short reflection round on what it was like taking the pictures.

Part 2:

- Print the photos and invite participants into a room where the mapping exercise can take place.
- Make sure you have a big poster on which the photos fit and can be placed by the participants.
- Invite participants to look at all the images and place them onto the poster in silence.
- It's important that they don't talk to each other but rely on other means to intuitively place and replace images as they see fit.

- The mapping process is only done when all participants feel that the way the images are placed onto the poster make sense.
- Now invite them to write down (preferably on post-its) what they see in front of them and allow them to place the post-its onto the poster.
- When everyone has placed their reflections onto the poster, you or participants can now read out loud what's on the post-its.
- Now you can have a reflection and interpretation on:
  * What do you see reflected on the poster?
  * What story does it tell in relation to the prompt?
  * Are there things that stand out to you? Conflicts you see between images? Or synergies?
  * Do you feel like the images you took make sense as part of the whole? If not, why?
  * How was this mapping process for you? What felt easy? What was difficult?
- Based on the reflections you can write the story that has emerged from the poster and conversation.
- This could be shared through your blog/social media/website or any other outlet to generate more engagement and conversation around your forest and restoration site.

Photo mapping activity[24]

[24] (Könen, 2023).

5.6: ADDRESSING CONFLICTS WITH COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

- **Goal:** To foster understanding and empathy among stakeholders with conflicting interests.
- **Why this approach?** Forests can be sites of conflict. One way to approach this is through the collaborative learning method, which encourages open communication, empathy and working together to find common ground in challenging and complex situations.[25]
- **For who is this tool for?** Researchers, NGOs, communications professionals, practitioners, forest owners, and policymakers.

Step-by-step how-to:

The collaborative learning approach is a group process aiming at shared problem-solving and decision-making, particularly in the context of natural resource management or environmental conflict resolution. It can support upscaling forest restoration by addressing complex problems. It encourages systemic thinking, empathy, and co-learning among diverse stakeholders, crucial for long-term success in large-scale projects. By promoting open communication, this approach can help to balance ecological, legal, and economic interests. It can also support knowledge exchange across regions and restoration sites.

Take a challenging, complex or contentious issue related to your site. Consider how you might design a collaborative learning workshop. This could include elements such as:

1. Introduction to the collaborative learning approach and relevant examples.[26]
2. Invitation to share different views on the situation, e.g. on restoration planning.
3. Discussing interests and concerns of participants.
4. Working together in groups to develop potential ways to address these concerns.
5. Sharing these approaches and reflecting on how they might be implemented, while considering what is desirable and feasible.

Example:
In the SUPERB project, we used this method to tackle a complex problem at a reforestation site in Germany, part of the Natura 2000 network of protected areas. The site, a former spruce monoculture damaged by bark beetles, was to be replanted with climate-adapted species. However, stakeholders disagreed on different aspects of the restoration planning. By organising a Collaborative Learning workshop, our aim was to foster empathy and common understanding among the various stakeholders, such as local managers, environmentalists, and legal experts - and to identify possible next steps in terms of future collaboration.

[25] This method was developed by Steven Daniels and Gregg Walker (Daniels & Walker, 2001).

[26] An introduction to the approach and selected best practice examples can be found here: Daniels & Walker, 2019.

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