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Forests and forestry in the future: what can we expect in the next fifty years?

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"... the greatest changes are almost certainly ahead of us. We can also be sure that the society of 2030 will be very different from that of today, and that it will bear little resemblance to that predicted by today's best-selling futurists."
Peter Drucker

Between 1950 and 2000, globally the forest sector has undergone significant change, the pace of which is expected to accelerate in the next five decades. Different societies interact with forests differently and as alternative sources of products and income become available, provision of environmental services gains primacy. Predicting the future of world's forests hence requires a better understanding of the overall development of societies. Within the next 50 years the major changes that are certain include:

- An increase in global population with divergent regional trends in growth and age distribution altering the demographic, social and economic map of the world;
- Technological advancements, especially in biomaterials, biotechnology and information and communication; and
- Changes in energy systems with renewables enhancing their share.

While these changes, strengthened through globalization, provide enormous opportunities, major uncertainties exist as regards political and institutional developments. Two broad scenarios could be identified, each resulting in a very different society – forest relationship. Since what happens to forests is largely decided by what happens outside the sector, it is imperative for the forestry profession to gain a better understanding of societal development to foresee emerging opportunities and constraints.

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Forest cover, environmental quality, and economic well-being: are they related?

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The theory of the Environmental Kuznets Curve contends that a U-shaped relationship exists between environmental quality and economic development. This paper examines two questions: (1) Is forest cover a meaningful benchmark indicator of environmental quality? (2) Is forest cover related to income levels? Findings reveal that forests serve as an important indicator of the soundness of the natural environment, but the correlation between forest cover and economic well-being measured by per capita GDP is tenuous, based on a statistical analysis of cross-country data. The discrepancy between theory and empirical evidence is explored, with a pointer to other important factors worthy of further investigation.