

Frequently Asked Questions about the Białowieża Forest



State Forests

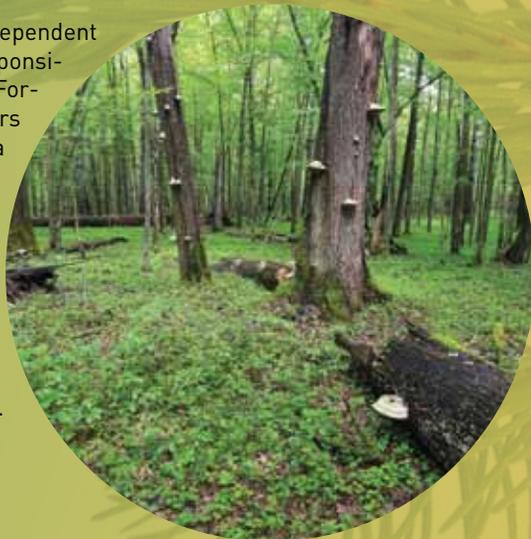
Poland 

1. Why is there a controversy over the Białowieża Forest?

The controversy arises over the methods and human involvement in protection of this precious area. The Białowieża Forest, as we know it, is a unique remnant of ancient forests. But its biodiversity will decline without human help. Foresters want to prevent this. However, the opponents of the State Forests' activities are in favour of leaving the nature to itself and preserving its processes - even if it involves the extinction of certain species or valuable habitats.

2. Do foresters cut trees in the Białowieża National Park?

No. The Białowieża National Park is an independent legal entity and tree cutting is the sole responsibility of its employees, and not the State Forests. However, the national park only covers one sixth of the Białowieża Forest area that lies on the territory of Poland. The remaining areas run by State Forests are divided into three districts - Białowieża, Browsk and Hajnówka. They largely consist of nature reserves and reference areas, which are not covered by forest management activities. Only half of the entire area of the Białowieża Forest is actively maintained by the foresters.



3. Do foresters cut trees in natural forests?

No. For centuries, most of the Białowieża Forest has been shaped by human activities and these areas are where foresters carry out their works.

Only about 20% of the forest area is natural. It is protected and does not undergo forestry-related activities.

The remaining parts are multifunctional forests with the prevalent focus on environmental protection. The foresters only carry out works in the areas planted by man, those subjected to forest management for ages, or those which should be reshaped to better fit the local conditions according to scientists.

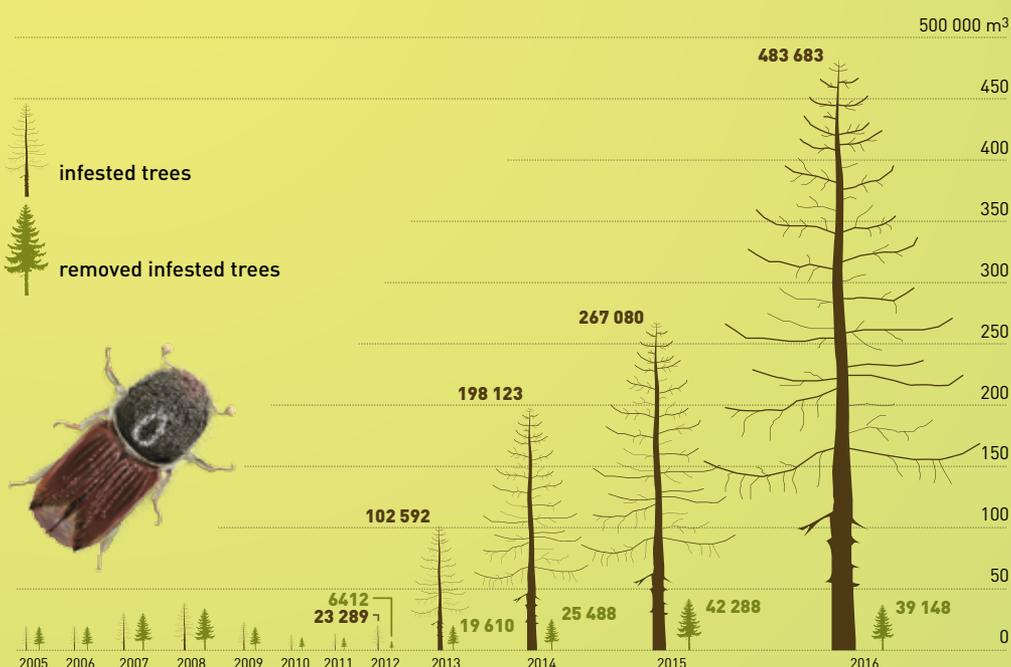
4. What threat does bark beetles pose?

The European spruce bark beetle feeds under the bark. It can kill a tree within a month. Usually, only old or weakened trees fall victim, but presently the teeming population of bark beetle also attacks young, healthy and strong trees. Insect outbreaks, called gradations, happen cyclically every few to dozen odd years. So far, the foresters have countered them effectively, but a few years ago their actions were hampered.



The bark beetle outbreak in the Białowieża Forest

2011-2012: In the new forest management plans for Białowieża, Browsk and Hajnówka district wood harvesting limits were radically decreased. This prevented the foresters from removing necessary numbers of infested spruce trees.



5. How did the bark beetle outbreak affect the Białowieża Forest?

Since 2012, more than 1.1 million trees have already died. More and more forest areas are dying out. Within the last five years in three Białowieża Forest districts, dieback of trees covered the area of over 7.2 thousand hectares. This is the surface equal to three central districts of Warsaw: Śródmieście, Wola and Ochota.

6. Was it ever possible to save those trees from the bark beetle?

Yes. Actions based on scientific knowledge and experience would allow the foresters to end the gradation at its onset. This had been done numerous times in similar situations over the last decades. In the Białowieża Forest districts, all affected spruces were removed to prevent the bark beetle from spreading to other areas. But the scale of logging was usually very limited. This was changed by the new forest management plans for Białowieża, Browsk and Hajnówka districts for the years 2012-2021. Wood harvesting limits were radically decreased and more areas of the forest were excluded from human involvement. This prevented the foresters from removing necessary numbers of infested spruce trees. The bark beetle population thrived, attacking more and more areas of the Białowieża Forest.

7. Is it still possible to stop the bark beetle gradation?

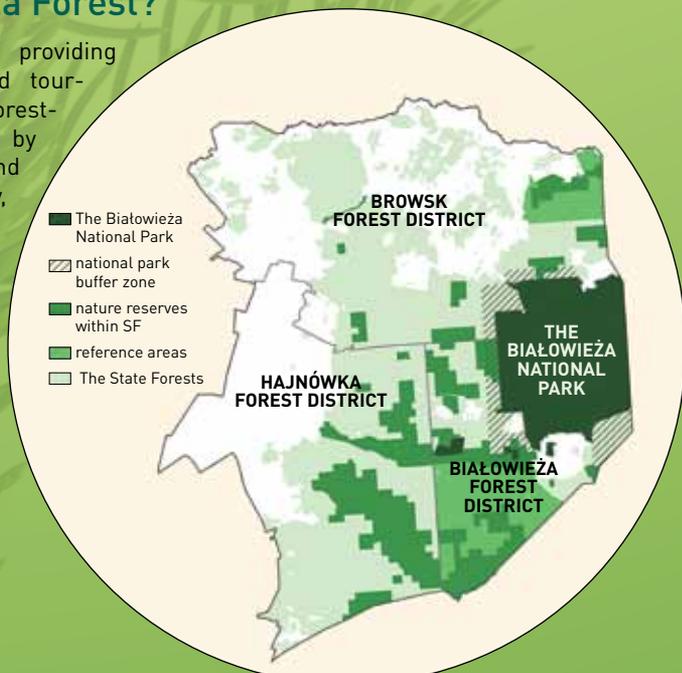
It is impossible to stop the outbreak entirely, because that would require cutting of all the affected spruces, also in protected areas such as the national park. However, removing the trees only from the areas managed by the State Forests would prevent the bark beetle from spreading to other areas. It is important to remember that bark beetles are capable of spreading from one tree to 30 more, and they can do it even five times a year.

8. Why do foresters fight the bark beetle?

It is required by law. According to the Forest Protection Act, the foresters' task is to protect the forests, which includes detection and control of infestations. The only known method of fighting bark beetle is to remove the affected trees before it spreads. Although stopping the gradation is no longer possible, the scale of disaster can still be reduced.

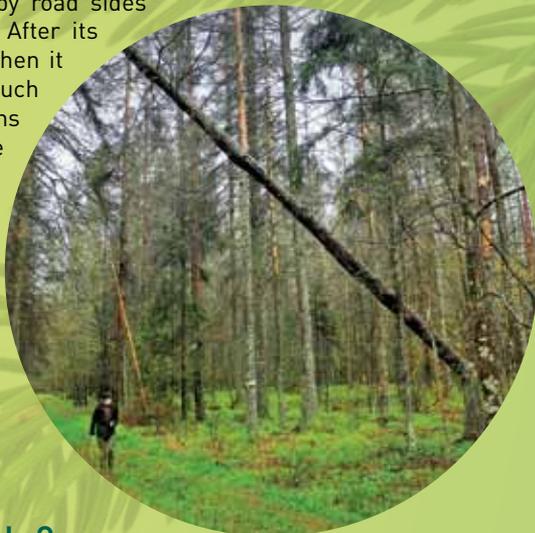
9. Why do foresters cut trees in the Białowieża Forest?

Current works are aimed at providing safety to local residents and tourists. On a daily basis, the foresters carry out tasks required by the regulations on forest and nature protection, public safety, forest management plans, and conservation management plan for Natura 2000 area. They also follow orders of the environmental and fire services.



10. Are dead spruces dangerous to people?

Dead spruces, especially the ones located by road sides and hiking trails, are extremely dangerous. After its death, a tree may stand from 2 to 8 years, then it breaks. There are over 100 thousand of such trees standing around the roads. Soon, dozens of thousands of trees killed by the bark beetle will start collapsing. If they are not removed by the foresters, access to the Białowieża Forest will have to be prohibited. Dead trees also increase the risk of fire, especially during dry summers and intensified tourist traffic.



11. Is the current logging performed on an unprecedented scale?

No, there is no mass logging in the forest. In all three districts of the Białowieża Forest, less than half the number of trees are cut down than in the previous decade.

Until 2021, annual wood harvesting limit in the Białowieża district is 18.8 thousand cubic metres. In comparison, in an average forest district outside the Białowieża Forest, more than 90 thousand cubic metres are cut annually, which is almost five times as much. Even in some Polish national parks more trees are being cut down than in Białowieża district.



12. Do foresters want to remove all dead wood from the forest?

No. Foresters know the importance of dead wood in the forest and take care that there is enough of it for many valuable species to survive. This is why some of the spruces killed by bark beetle are left in the forest to decompose. Today, in three forest districts in the Białowieża Forest there is almost twice as much dead wood as the average amount for national parks.



13. Do the State Forests cut trees in the Białowieża Forest for money?

The foresters do not do it for money. For years the State Forests have been running multifunctional forest management, which gives nature protection priority over selling timber.

All three forest districts in the Białowieża Forest have been generating losses for years – they rely on funds of forest districts from all over Poland. The salaries of local foresters are not related to the amount of harvested timber.

14. Why are harvesters used during logging?

Using harvesters is the safest logging method for both people and the environment. With so many dead trees in the Białowieża Forest having to be logged, the harvesters are safer option for forest workers. It is operated by just one person protected by a reinforced cabin.

The use of forest machines does not mean that there will be more felling, the same work will simply be done more efficiently, thus the area will be safe and accessible to tourists and local residents sooner.

15. Are the foresters' activities legal?

Of course. The regulations require that the foresters actively protect the forest, including combating the bark beetle. According to article 9 of the Forest Protection Act, protecting the forests involves maintenance of balanced ecosystems, improvement of natural immunity of trees, including prevention, detection and combating infestations of pests. The subsequent article states that in case of harmful species threatening the forest, protective measures must be employed. State Forests' actions are subject to the regulations of the Minister of Environment, district-specific forest management plans and internal regulations of the State Forests (e.g. 'Forest Protection Instruction').

The European law obliges the foresters to act. The entire Białowieża Forest is part of Natura 2000 area, therefore the State Forests are required to maintain valuable habitats and protected species. Many of them need active protection, described in Natura 2000's conservation plan, such as removal of selected trees.

16. Did the European Court of Justice forbid any cuttings in the Białowieża Forest?

No. According to the decision of the Vice-President of the European Court of Justice of 27th of July, 2017, the State Forests are allowed to cut down trees which threaten public safety. This is the nature of works carried out in the Białowieża Forest right now.

17. Does the status of the Białowieża Forest as UNESCO World Heritage Site mean that tree cuttings are banned?

No. The Białowieża Forest's status as UNESCO World Heritage Site does not imply that the logging is banned in the entire forest. UNESCO World Heritage Committee does not oppose actions taken to ensure public safety.



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©The State Forest Information Centre
ul. Grójecka 127, 02-124 Warszawa
phone: 22 18 55 353, e-mail: cilp@cilp.lasy.gov.pl
www.lasy.gov.pl

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Do foresters plant single-species rows of trees on clear-felled areas?

18.

No, there will be no single-species plantations in the Białowieża Forest. In every place where larger numbers of trees have died, the foresters prepare the area for natural regeneration and, if necessary, they plant species that are particularly suitable for this place, such as oaks, maples and lindens. The purpose of the foresters' activities is to support nature and to restore the natural balance.



What is currently happening in the Białowieża Forest?

19.

Forest districts execute the Decision no. 51 of the Director-General of the SF of 17th of February, 2017 (which implements the recommendations of the Minister of Environment) by removing dead spruces, regardless of their age, located along roads and paths which pose a threat to forest goers and increase the risk of fire. Occasionally, trees of other species (e.g. damaged by collapsing spruces or suspended above roads) may also be removed.

What are reference stands?

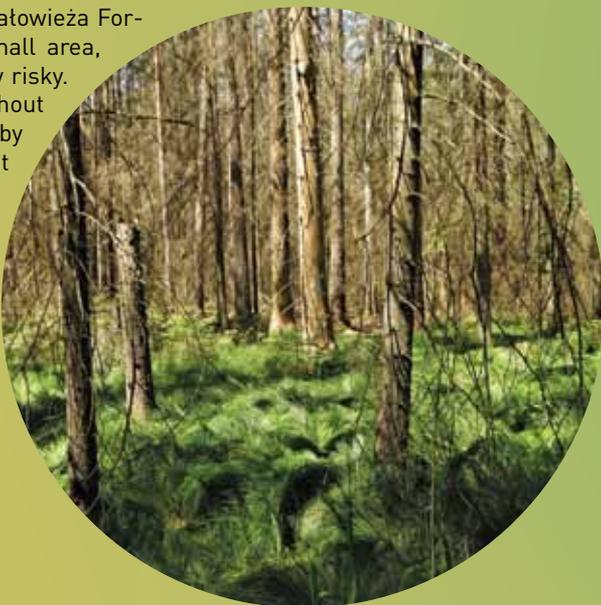
20.

In March 2016, the Director-General of the State Forests designated a total of 5.6 thousand hectares in Browsk and Białowieża districts as a reference area where human intervention is minimized. This will allow for observing of natural processes and comparing the conditions with the areas where forest management is carried out to alleviate damages caused by the bark beetle. These are extra areas left to nature, on top of the already existing forest reserves.

Why cannot the Białowieża Forest be left to itself?

21.

Due to strong human imprint on the Białowieża Forest in the past and to its relatively small area, leaving it at this moment would be very risky. Today, the post-infestation areas left without any human intervention are dominated by hornbeams, hazel and invasive grass at the expense of other, more indigenous species. Research conducted within a strict nature reserve shows that leaving the forest to itself leads to reduction of biodiversity and disappearance of many valued species.



22. Do foresters treat the Białowieża Forest as a special place?

The Białowieża Forest is a priceless treasure for foresters. For over 90 years, they have been striving to protect it and to repair all damages it suffered in the early 20th century. During the First World War, in just two years the Germans occupying this area logged 4.5 million cubic meters of wood. In the interwar period, the Białowieża Forest was exploited by an English company The Century ETC. In four years, the company logged and exported over 2.5 million cubic meters of timber. They were planning to clear-fell 20 thousand hectares of the Białowieża Forest, but fortunately the efforts of foresters led to termination of the company's contract in 1929. If the foresters had not been persistent, many valuable parts of the forest wouldn't exist today.

The Second World War was also tragic for the Białowieża Forest. In just two years of occupation, the Soviet authorities logged over 1.5 million cubic meters of timber. Only after the end of war the nature, with the support of Polish foresters, could begin to heal the wounds made by the oppressors.

23. Why isn't the entire area of the Białowieża Forest classified as national park?

The foresters do not have a say in case of enlargement of the Białowieża National Park. Only the politicians can make the decision. The State Forests, like the Białowieża National Park, are subject to the Polish Minister of Environment and implement the forest policy of the state. All orders of the ministry concerning this issue must be carried out by the foresters and implemented by the State Forests.

Transforming the entire Białowieża Forest into a national park would not mean abandoning human involvement. Trees are also cut in parks, even if only for environmental conservation. Leaving the nature to itself would require creating a strict reserve in the area, which would imply limited access, as is currently the case in the strict reserve in Białowieża National Park.



24. Did foresters prohibit access to the Białowieża Forest for tourists?

No, the majority of the Białowieża Forest falls under the SF management and the most popular trails are available.

The Białowieża Forest district managers introduce periodic entry bans only for specific, carefully selected locations, where the dead trees are being removed or where a large number of dead trees pose a risk. As the work progresses and the threats are being eliminated, trails and sites are reopened. Updated maps can be found on forest districts' websites and at www.lasy.gov.pl.



25. Is it legal for the foresters to remove the protesters blocking the works in the Białowieża Forest?

Forest guards act on the basis of provisions of the Forest Protection Act, which imposes, among other duties, obligation to fight property crime and offenses. People blocking work in the forest and staying in prohibited areas violate the law, so it is the duty of forest guards to intervene.