

The Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE)

Preamble

The Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE), set up in 1990, is a cooperation between more than 40 European states and the European Union to work together to protect and ensure the sustainable use of Europe's forests. The MCPFE includes a number of non-European countries and international organizations, which have observer status in the initiative.

The MCPFE is a discussion platform focusing on risks and opportunities in the forestry sector. It also develops guidelines for the forestry industry in Europe. Europe's forest and woodland policy is effectively worked out using these guidelines, as there is no common EU forestry policy.

The Fourth Ministerial Conference called the "Living Forest Summit" took place from 28th to 30th April 2003 in Vienna under an Austrian presidency.

Start Situation

The Liaison Unit Vienna acted as the base of the initiative and was responsible for processing discussion-topic proposals, documenting proceedings, information transfer and the organization of all international meetings following the previous ministerial conference (1998 in Lisbon). There was the challenge of the communications and public relations work for a conference which would produce decisions that were a compromise between different interest groups (from environmentalists to private forest owners to the forestry industry) and between more than 40 nations (from Norway to Monaco), in addition to the organization of an international meeting at ministerial level. The approved resolutions are only interim conclusions and not final ones.

The five key topics at the Fourth Ministerial Conference were: biological diversity in Europe's forests, sector-wide cooperation and national forestry programs, the sustainable use of forests, cultural aspects and forest and climate conservation.

Definition of Targets

The MCPFE's most important issues and concerns should be made known to a wider audience beyond the conference. Environmentally aware members of the public should be made more conscious of forest protection and sustainability in Europe, not just experts.

The goals were:

- To make a wider public conscious of the ministerial conference system and its discussions.
- To increase awareness of the ministerial conference in Austria.
- To ensure reporting targeted on the Vienna conference in the (national) media.
- To create a positive atmosphere for discussion at the conference itself and among participants.

Dialog Groups

The audiences included:

- The forestry and woodland ministers and delegations, as well as conference participants
- Environmentally aware members of the general public
- Children, school students – as the goal of the MCPFE is to preserve forests for future generations
- Interested parties from culture
- National and international journalists in politics and journals of events

Strategy

A strategy to communicate concerns about Europe's forests in a symbolic way was chosen because of the complexity of the subject. The symbolic method required was accompanied by attractive pictures to boost levels of electronic-media reports. PR activities were concentrated in Vienna's Museumsquartier.

The political contents of the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests were successfully brought over using trees to represent the European forest and via the exhibition forest.art.

Exhibited was:

- the biological variety of the forest
- constructive European cooperation
- youth as the future of sustainable development
- the forest as a bearer of human culture

Activities

1. European Forest – a symbolic forest for Europe

Official opening event and visible symbol of MCPFE

The “European Forest” was made up of 45 trees, each representing a country at the conference. All of the countries taking part in the conference were asked to name a typical tree found in their homeland. The creation of the European forest took place in close cooperation with the countries involved and taking into account climate considerations.

Museumsquartier

Several partners were involved in the project “European Forest”. The Vienna Museumsquartier agreed to allow its courtyard to be used as an exhibition place for the forest and also as the opening venue for the conference.

Gymnasium Rahlgasse

The state secondary school Bundesgymnasium Rahlgasse, which had been focusing on environment questions at this time, dealt with the subject forests intensively in the summer semester of 2003. School students in the second year worked on an exhibition during their biology lessons and this was shown in the courtyard next to the children’s museum ZOOM. The students also painted the flags of the 45 participating countries during art classes.

Pairs of children in the second year were made patrons of each country tree. They looked after the tree for several weeks, including daily watering.

The 45 country trees were presented to the public on the opening day of the conference in front of the participating ministers, members of the international and Austrian media and the attending school students from the Bundesgymnasium Rahlgasse, as a living symbol of the European forest. EU Commissar Franz Fischler and Austrian Federal Minister Josef Pröll made the opening speeches.

Reuse of Trees

The trees stayed in the Museumsquartier for three weeks. During this time, MQ visitors could walk through the European forest and learn about each of the trees by reading the information signs provided.

Then, each country tree was given a long-term home. The City of Vienna, which supported the project with know-how from the City Gardens Office and Forestry Office, used the trees as part of a housing project in Vienna’s 23rd district.

Discussion with Austrian Minister Pröll

The older students at the secondary school Bundesgymnasium Rahlgasse also worked on the issues discussed at the ministerial conference – such as forest protection, forestry and climate change – in March and April 2003 and prepared questions for the minister responsible. The students were able to pose their questions in person to Minister Josef Pröll on 10th April 2003. More than 50 students aged between 14 and 17 took part in the discussion, which was led by the school's environment team.

2. Forest.Art

Not seeing the wood for the trees

The forest as a human living environment has always been a stimulus for cultivating the arts. Traces of hundreds of years of human history can be found in the forests of Europe in the form of monasteries, castles; and wood and bark are materials used in artworks -- from wood carving to sculpture to architecture. The forest and its aura have always been a part of literature, the performing arts and music.

A resolution anchoring socio-cultural aspects into the planning and implementing of forestry policy was agreed to during the fourth ministerial conference. Historically and culturally important places in forests should be recognized, research into them supported and communication about them encouraged.

The invitation

The exhibition forest.Art was a multinational project, conceptualized as a competition between six art universities from the four countries in the conference's steering committee at that time (Austria, Norway, Poland, Portugal).

The graduation class of each university from summer 2002 (and from different disciplines) was invited to work on the topic of "forest" in the winter semester 2002/2003. An internal jury from the universities involved chose a maximum of three pieces to display at the exhibition in Vienna in March 2003.

The exhibition

The Vienna Museumsquartier's quartier21 was chosen as the exhibition location. It was directly next to the "European Forest" and was open to the public for three weeks.

The poster

The design for the exhibition poster was selected through an internal competition at the College of Applied Arts. It was created by the Institute for Design.

The viewing

The exhibition opening was on the evening of the first conference day with the participating ministers and exhibiting artists. An independent, international jury chose three winning projects from all the ones exhibited and these were shown at a special viewing.

3. Press work

Most of the contents of the conference had been agreed on at the beginning of 2003. The press work in the run-up to the conference focused on individual and background interviews with experts from the Liaison Unit because of the limited newsworthiness of previously agreed resolutions and topics the different interest groups associated with forests allowed for.

The five most important topics at the conference (biological variety in Europe's forests, multi-sector cooperation and national forestry programs, the efficiency of sustainable forestry, cul-

tural aspects and forest and climate protection) were also brought to journalists' attention before the event via press releases for both national and international media.

The conclusions of the conference were transported by the conference steering committee (Austria, Norway, Poland, Portugal) at a press conference toward the end of the event, as well as by press releases.

4. Giveaways

The giveaways offered to conference participants were also designed to symbolically reflect the subject of forests. Wooden dice stamped with the words “smell – hear – watch – taste – feel – live” were created in cooperation with two young designers to represent the emotional connection to forests felt by people all over Europe.

The designers also conceptualized a folder as a special giveaway for European forestry ministers, alluding back to the dice. The creation of a personalized folder was made possible through pushing out individual wooden points in it.

5. Evaluation

Media resonance analysis showed that, among other things, the general tendency of media reports was either mainly positive (48.1 %) or neutral (40.7 %).

Not surprisingly, most of the reports were made in April 2003, the month of the conference (66.7 %). However, there were some good reports in May 2003.

There were photos or pictures in 69 % of the reports because of the idea to deliver pictures to the media.