

Climate Witness Georg Sperber (Germany):

“I am Georg Sperber from Bavaria, Germany. I have worked as a forester for more than 30 years, and the forests I have worked in have changed over these years. Especially in the past 20 years I have seen changes that were remarkable in their nature and intensity. I believe climate change is the main reason.

You hear a lot about global warming in the media, but out there in the woods you can feel the difference, even without knowing the alarming facts of climate science. The Nineties have been the warmest decade in climate history, and this was obvious to anyone who lives in touch with nature.



In my forests the consequences for spruce trees are especially dramatic. Spruce is the backbone of the German forest industry, covering 28% of Germany's forests. However, higher average temperatures and more frequent droughts due to climate change weaken these trees.

They are under attack from bark beetle populations, which have massively increased because of the warming. And over past years storms like Vivian, Wiebke and Lothar – worse in intensity due to climate change – have wrecked havoc on spruce forests.

Rainfall patterns have also changed significantly. In the Steigerwald forest, rainfall used to peak in spring and early summer when the plants needed the extra water most. But since the Nineties this peak has moved to autumn. All in all the weather has become unpredictable, and the changes affect the forest industry badly. With global warming, spruce is a tree without future.

The bark beetle is not the only harmful parasite that loves the warmer temperatures. The oak procession moth also spreads heavily and even attacks people with its poisonous hairs, causing painful skin irritations that can last two years. When I studied forestry in the Fifties, the moth was an entomological rarity. But nowadays local authorities in the Mainfranken region are forced to hire fire brigades to battle them. Again and again oak forests – where you find the moth – are sealed off to protect the public. And the fire workers have to wear protective clothing when entering the affected forests.

After I retired 8 years ago, I am out in the woods even more often. Migratory birds always had my special attention, and climate change is also troubling their lives. Each year in spring they return a bit earlier than usual, and they leave much later in autumn. Some Chiffchaffs or Blackcaps don't leave at all these days, but try to stay over winter. Sometimes I see species I would not have seen in the past. I am excited about these encounters, but they also worry me a lot, because they show that things are changing.

Climate change is the biggest challenge mankind is facing. Currently we are about to put a huge burden on the shoulders of our children and grandchildren. We are absolutely aware that we are doing it, but we know that we shouldn't be doing it.”



Biography

Georg Sperber was born in Nürnberg in 1933. After doing his A-levels in Fürth (1952) he moved to Munich to study forestry. Field trips and internships brought Georg to Bosnia, Spain and Sweden, before he graduated from university in 1959. He is co-founder of the German working group on “Sustainable Forest Management” and of the German “Ecological Hunting Association”. He has also published books about his beloved forests. All through his professional career the 72-year-old forester has taught others in forestry. As member of the Executive Board he also helped to manage one of Germany most beautiful forests, a National Park called “Bayerischer Wald”. For 33 years Georg was in charge of a large, well known deciduous forest called “Steigerwald”. He has watched nature closely ever since and has kept a diary of his observations for more than 20 years.

Background

The distribution of trees in Germany and most of Central Europe is mainly determined by air temperature and the amount of rain – exactly the factors which are altered by climate change. Rising average temperatures and changes in the water regime have both short and long-term effects on trees and forests across Germany. The degradation in the water supply puts them at particular risk. Less rainfall in summer and water reserves in the soil are insufficient to secure an adequate water supply in some regions. For the trees this results in drying stress, decreased growth and weaker vitality, making them more vulnerable to storm or pest damages. This worrying development also has economic implications. Timber logged because of such forest damage is usually of less value. As the total amount of timber increases due to so called “unexpected yields”, the price per unit of wood on the market is usually lower. Today, such “unexpected yields” already account for about 40 per cent of the total wood yield in several regions. Harmful parasites benefit from climate change. For them rising temperatures mean more favourable living conditions, resulting in a higher number of individuals, an expanded range of distribution, and immigration of new species.