

IUFRO Spotlight is an initiative of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations. Its aim is to introduce, in a timely fashion, significant findings in forest research from IUFRO officeholders and member organizations to a worldwide network of decision makers, policy makers and researchers. IUFRO will encapsulate, and distribute in plain language, brief, topical and policy-relevant highlights of those findings, along with information on where/how to access the full documents.

Occasionally, *IUFRO Spotlight* also presents special activities such as sessions at major IUFRO congresses or the work of the IUFRO Task Forces. These focus on emerging key issues that contribute to international processes and activities and are of great interest to policy makers and to groups inside and outside the forest sector. With those criteria in mind, **the Spotlights for the next several months will highlight the undertakings and goals of the IUFRO Task Forces.** The *IUFRO Spotlights* will be distributed in a periodic series of emails as well as blog postings.

IUFRO Spotlight #80 / July 2020

Becoming visible – non-timber forest products and a sustainable economy

One positive and largely overlooked outcome of the current coronavirus could be a stronger bioeconomy.

“I think the pandemic is going to spur the bioeconomy,” said Dr. James Chamberlain of the United States Forest Service, Southern Research Station in Blacksburg, Virginia, and Coordinator of IUFRO’s ***Unlocking the Bioeconomy and Non-Timber Forest Products*** Task Force.

“I’ve seen evidence that use of fossil fuels declined significantly during the pandemic. The BBC reported on June 10 that Britain had gone coal-free for two months, replacing production with wood pellets. Interest in renewable energy is growing rapidly, and the marginal costs of switching to renewable energy are making alternative energy attractive. The bioeconomy is emerging as a major strategic economic movement of the 21st Century.

“People are eating better and demanding healthy and nutritious foods, in part because of the pandemic. And we’re not eating out as much. We’re cooking in. This will drive demand for forest foods that contribute to a bioeconomy,” he added.

The bioeconomy is a relatively new model for industry and the economy that involves using renewable biological resources sustainably to produce food, energy and other goods.

It has been described as knowledge-based production and use of biological resources to provide products, processes and services in all sectors within the frame of a sustainable economic system.



Becoming visible - here leaves of Cinnamomum tamala, traded in thousands of tonnes. Photo by Carsten Smith-Hall.

Transition to a bioeconomy is expected to reduce fossil fuel dependency and contribute to climate and environmental protection.

Dr. Carsten Smith-Hall of the University of Copenhagen, Department of Food and Resource Economics, and Deputy Coordinator of the Task Force concurs.

“A bioeconomy approach,” he says, “offers an opportunity to refocus and strengthen efforts to achieve sustainable management of renewable natural resources, including forests. What works locally and how can that be scaled up?”

The impetus for the bioeconomy movement was biotechnology oriented – contributing to replacing fossil fuels with biofuels. By pointing to shea nuts in Burkina Faso and medicinal plants in Nepal as examples, he maintains that non-timber forest products (NTFPs) can become a major component in local, and even national, economies, provided supporting legislative and socio-economic environments are created.

The Task Force – one of nine IUFRO Task Forces – is investigating whether and how non-timber forest products have been integrated into global and national efforts to transition to and expand the bioeconomy, and how such efforts can be supported.

“Now is the time to highlight the science-based knowledge from around the world to explore how to integrate these important products into full valuation of forests to facilitate sustainable management,” Dr. Smith-Hall said.

“It also provides us with the opportunity to rethink bioeconomic approaches,” he added. “In particular on how to refocus from biotechnological thinking that originated in the global north to sustainable management of global resources.”

Dr. Chamberlain noted: “A large vocal part of global society recognizes that we cannot do business as we have been doing for a long, long time. We need a new economic model that embraces sustainable sourcing of raw materials, including all forest products.



*Big business - here dried medicinal plants on the way to industries in India.
Photo by Carsten Smith-Hall*

“Climate change is certainly a major driving force behind the push to eliminate fossil fuels to support a bioeconomy. But there is much more to the emergence of the bioeconomy than that: consumers want their products to be sustainably sourced, socially fairly procured, and benefits equitably distributed.”

“The study and exploration of the bioeconomy relative to non-timber forest products is in its infancy,” he said. “We hope to address questions such as how can we integrate NTFPs into a bioeconomy and what are feasible and realistic pathways to the bioeconomy?”

The Task Force is using a three-pronged approach to the issue:

- *Theoretical*: defining and characterizing the role of NTFPs in transitioning to a bioeconomy;
- *Empirical*: analyzing how and to what extent NTFPs promote sustainable resource use, generate employment and contribute to food and livelihood security and poverty alleviation; and

- *Practical*: developing monitoring approaches and identifying interventions and policies to support the integration of NTFPs into bioeconomy strategies, including national reporting schemes.

Task Force outputs aim to support the integration of non-timber forest products into bioeconomic approaches worldwide.

Additionally, the Task Force members want to see the people, industry and resource base affected by the management of non-timber forest products fully integrated into transition pathways to a bioeconomy.

Find out more about the IUFRO Task Force on Unlocking the Bioeconomy and Non-Timber Forest Products: <https://www.iufro.org/science/task-forces/bioeconomy-and-non-timber-forest-products/>

The IUFRO Task Forces are established on a temporary basis during each 5-year IUFRO Board term and focus on emerging key forest-related issues. The nine current TFs will run till 2024 at which time their relevance will be assessed in relation to the forest issues of the day.

The findings reported in IUFRO Spotlight are submitted by IUFRO officeholders and member organizations. IUFRO is pleased to highlight and circulate these findings to a broad audience but, in doing so, acts only as a conduit. The quality and accuracy of the reports are the responsibility of the member organization and the authors.

Suggestions for reports and findings that could be promoted through IUFRO Spotlight are encouraged. To be considered, reports should be fresh, have policy implications and be applicable to more than one country. If you would like to have a publication highlighted by Spotlight, contact: Gerda Wolfrum, IUFRO Communications Coordinator, wolfrum(at)iufro.org

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IUFRO Spotlight #80, published in July 2020, by IUFRO Headquarters, Vienna, Austria. Available for download at:

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