

# More than a Century of Experience: The Community Forest Beočin in Serbia

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## INTRODUCTION

Beočin is a town and municipality in the Vojvodina province in Serbia (see location map, Figure 1). The population is 7,839, whilst that of the Beočin municipality is 15,726 inhabitants. The Beočin Community Forest (in Serbian: “Šumska Zajednica Beočin”), is the oldest Association of private forest owners in Serbia. It was established in 1903, when farmers from the village of Beočin, and who also worked in this forest, bought it from three Austro-Hungarian noblemen. This area was, at that time, on the periphery of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and so it was of little interest to these owners, however, to the indigenous people of Beočin work in the forest was almost the only source of income. Mr. Bogdan Glumac, the village teacher, invited all the farmers to a special meeting and suggested that they join together, combining forces

to buy the forest. He declared: “Whoever wants to own the forest let him get up!” - and all the 79 farmers from Beočin stood up and the decision to buy the forest was made (Nas Vek, 2003). An Association was set up with the goal of helping members, who were mainly poor farmers, to secure some additional income and satisfy their household needs for wood through common management of the forest. Since then, this community forest has survived the many political changes that have occurred in Serbia, but has never stopped implementing forest management. An additional fact is that it is exceptional for an independent private forest to be located in the heart of a National Park.

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Figure 1. Location map of the Municipality Beočin and Community Forest Beočin (Photo: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/278037557\\_fig1\\_Fig-1-Map-of-Vojvodina-Northern-Serbia-with- Novi-Sad-modified-after-Basarin-et-al](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/278037557_fig1_Fig-1-Map-of-Vojvodina-Northern-Serbia-with- Novi-Sad-modified-after-Basarin-et-al))

## METHOD

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This paper was prepared by intensive desk based analysis of the legal framework relevant to community forestry, as well as the scientific and other relevant literature including newspaper articles, and websites. The legal context is mainly based on the Law on Forests and the Law on Nature Protection, due to the fact

that the Community Forest is located inside the Fruska Gora National Park (Figure 1). The governance framework for the management of the Community Forest, with the rights and obligation of members, is set out in the Statute of Association, updated in 2006.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK - COMMUNITY FOREST ASSOCIATION

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The umbrella document for the Community Forest is a Statute, adopted in 2006, that has provisions to regulate the management of the forest.

- **Article 1** defines the status of the Association, and states that: “The Association of private forest owners “Šumska zajednica” Beočin is a non-governmental, non-profitable association, established with no time limit to realise goals from the domain of forestry.”
- **Article 8** is directed toward collective work defines this as follows: “Bodies of association are constituted and implemented on the basis of collective work, decision-making and responsibility. Programs of activity are created on the basis of the democratically expressed will of Association members.”
- **Article 19** deals with family issues declaring that “owners of ideal forest parts and members of their families have the right of free recreational usage of the Community Forest complex, with the obligation to conserve natural beauty and to cherish them without causing any material damage (...)”. The use of the term ‘ideal’ here, referring to part of the forest, indicated that, while the owner knows they own an area of a specific size, there is no way for them to identify where within the forest this is located.

This theme of responsible forest management is one of the most important issues, and it is repeated in several articles:

- **Article 23** states that “members of the Association are obligated to complete their knowledge on the basic terminology relating to the management of privately owned forests (...)”
- **Article 39** continues that “Members of Administrative Board (...) are obliged to become familiar with the forest areas covered by the Association, the external borders and inner division into sections in order to enable them to make appropriate management decisions and carry out the duties entrusted to them.”
- **Article 34** enables the Administrative Board to “engage professional advisors as required to assist them, although these have no role in the democratic decision making process.”

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

## How the forest was bought

After the decision to buy this forest had been made, the legal aspects were entrusted to a lawyer named Dr. Jovan Jovanic. All of the farmers from Beočin assigned him a power of attorney to “represent them in all civil, legal and castigation matters, in front of the court, outside of the court and in front of political areas” (Nas Vek, 2003). Notably, the “lawyer is specifically authorised to sign the contract on behalf of the Association members with the original owners, namely Karl Kron from Novi Sad and Aleksandar Leopold and Ludvig Liht from Sepsard”. The sale contract was written in German, and comprised seven short paragraphs, as was the standard form of the time.

A deposit of 6,000 Crowns was paid directly to Kron, representing the Hungarian noblemen, with the remaining 54,000 Crowns handed over when the change of ownership was recorded in the land register, according to the contract. Two copies of the sale contract were signed by the forestry sellers (Kron, in Novi Sad, and Leopold and Liht in Sepsardu),

on February 27, 1903, with Dr. Jovanic signing on behalf of the villagers. These signatures were witnessed with a few sentences in Hungarian by the public notary in Novi Sad, who added his signature and seal. As the farmers were poor, they raised a loan from the “Srpska Banka” in Zagreb, with each of them pledging the entire property so having the same loan burden; this debt was repaid over the next 17 years.

During the Communist period, after the Second World War, the authorities demanded that agricultural owners renounce their property and contribute it to the Community, so the land was transferred into common ownership. This was exactly what had been done by the setting up of the Community Forest in 1903 so this was not an independent ownership, and the Beočin people managed to survive the communist system. From the very first day, the forest was managed equitably in exactly the way the Communists considered ideal, so there was simply no place for objections. Buying land from noblemen was considered as a successful example of effective class combat.



Figure 2. Names of the original members of the Association recorded on a panel on the outside wall of the Community building in Beočin (Photo: N. Petrovic)



Figure 3. The Community Forest Association Building (Photo: <https://www.facebook.com/229624460582008/photos/a.229794097231711.1073741830.229624460582008/713793868831729/?type=3&theater>)

## PRESENT SITUATION

The Beočin Community Forest is located within the zone of protection in the Fruska Gora National Park, and is covered by the Forest Management plan, in compliance with the National Park Spatial Plan<sup>1</sup> which, in turn, is set in the framework of the Law on Forests<sup>2</sup> and the Law on Nature Protection<sup>3</sup>. The members of the Community Forest Association are actively involved in the formulation of the plan, including the amount of wood they would like to harvest, and so respect the management prescriptions and comply with them while using the forest resource. There is, in addition, a specific plan for the Community Forest, considered as a distinct management unit (FMU “Forest community”), consisting of 8 separate compartments that are further divided into stands; the current management plan is for the period 2017-2026.

The composition of the forest is influenced by its geographical position on the southern rim of the Panonian plain on the Fruska Goramountain, as well as by the landform, geological and pedology diversity. In some parts there are stands of sessile oak, beech and, to a lesser extent, lime or hornbeam; mixed stands are mainly lime and beech or, more rarely, hornbeam and sessile oak. Pure beech and pure hornbeam are very rare. It is classified as sessile oak forest with butcher’s-broom (*Aculeato-Quercus Carpinetum serbicum* Jov.). The management was originally mainly coppice and mostly used for firewood.

The forest management strategy has not changed since the forest came under the ownership of the community. According to the data from the Forest Management Plan for the period 2007-2016, natural coppice stands of broadleaves

covers 53.8% of forest area, while natural coppice stands of soft broadleaves covers 46% of area, which is in total 99.8%. Only 0.2% of forest area is covered with artificially established stands of conifers. Pure stands cover 18% of forest area, while mixed stands cover 82% of area.

Total yield planned for a ten-year period is 6,854.5 m<sup>3</sup>, which amounts to 685.45 m<sup>3</sup> annually. Of the total yield, the quantity of main yield (from regeneration fellings) is 1,472.9 m<sup>3</sup>, which is 21.5% of total yield, and the quantity of previous yield (from thinnings) is 5,381.6 m<sup>3</sup>, or 78.5% of the total yield.

Concerning the assortment structure, having in mind that this is coppice forest, it is estimated that the amount of sawn wood is 30%, while the amount of firewood is 70%.

Expert technical tasks in the FC Beočin are performed by a forest technician, who is also a member of the Community. The Association is able to apply for State funding for constructing forest roads to enable efficient extraction; they do not own any equipment. The Community Forest comprises an Assembly and a Steering Committee; the majority of members (65%) live in Beočin and its surroundings.

Since nobody knows which specific part of the forest they own, there can be no independent harvesting. Individual shares can be sold, but only to community members, ensuring that this forest remains in the possession of the successors of original Beočin peasants (Figure 2) who invested everything they had in this forest. If there is more than one inheritor, the original

<sup>1</sup> Spatial Plan of the special purpose area of NP “Fruska Gora” to the year 2022. Official Gazette of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina Nr. 16/04

<sup>2</sup> Law on forests. Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, Nr. 30/2010, 93/2012 & 89/2015

<sup>3</sup> Law on Nature Protection. Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, Nr. 36/2009, 88/2010, 91/2010 - cor. & 14/2016

share can be split, into new equal parts. In this way no member can exclude themselves from the Association, nor can the right to timber be taken away, except when forbidden from participating in work of the Community as a result of failure to respect the special “code of conduct”, which includes 30 items. The most interesting thing concerning this association is the provision that no owner is allowed to sell his/her part to anyone outside the community. An Assembly of members is held (Figure 3) to decide who can buy shares if they are offered for sale, and those with smaller shares have priority. If no one is interested, the Association will purchase them.

Every year approximately 1,000 m<sup>3</sup> is felled. 552 m<sup>3</sup> is divided into 46 integral parts, with each member receiving an allocation in accordance with their shares. The remainder of the timber is sold and the revenue is divided according to the same principle. Participation varies from 0.166 to 1.5 ‘ideal parts’ (individual shares), depending on the participation of individuals in the original purchase of the forest, and how these have been divided up on inheritance or combined by purchase (Table 1).

In April 2003, the Community Forest “Šumska zajednica Beočin” celebrated a century of existence. This community represents a significant exception to the general principle of private forest management in Serbia. Its success and long survival demonstrates that good cooperation between forest owners is possible under such conditions.

It is interesting that, until the 1960s, inheritance was only through the male line. Until then, women were not permitted to own any part of the forest, so those in the line of succession were compensated either financially or with agricultural land, enabling the forest share to pass to their brother. As the result of societal change, this no longer takes place. However, it took a century from the date of establishment for a woman to be elected as the head of the Association. Today, more than half of the owners are women, and the president of the Community Forest is Mrs. Sonja Kokic, one of the owners.

Changes in lifestyle has resulted in a new type of owner, based in the city rather than the countryside and this is likely to result in changes in the way this forest is managed. Nevertheless, there is still a “critical mass” (Oliver, et al., 1985)

Table 1. Current participation of owners in total ownership of FC “Beočin”

Share	Number of owners	Number of ‘ideal’ parts	Part for distribution (m <sup>3</sup> )	
			Per owner	Total
1.5	1	1.50	18	18
1.25	1	1.25	15	15
1	21	21.00	12	252
0.75	1	0.75	9	9
0.66	2	1.33	8	16
0.5	27	13.50	6	162
0.33	12	4.00	4	48
0.25	8	2.00	3	24
0.166	4	0.67	2	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>46.00</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>552</b>

that is the driving force for all of the activities implemented in this forest and the widespread collective action within this community.

According to Schraml (2005) “forestry associations represent an important forest policy tool for overcoming the problems that often arise with small forest ownership”. This community has survived for more than one century with no change in its internal organisation, other than in the legal constitution reflecting changes in regulations. According to Kittredge (2005), in the United States and many other countries a feature of community forestry, the association, is the main distributor of timber to market, which has a positive impact for the owners. These also

benefit from joint management, enabling the production of larger quantities of timber and sharing the costs of harvesting and extraction. One of the largest benefits of the owners is that the Community Forest Association can negotiate a higher price of timber and other forest products than would be possible for individual forest owners.

As there are no boundaries between properties and owners don't know where their property is located, there are no barriers to cooperation and joint management. The management plan is based on the concept of ‘close to nature’ forest management, respecting the natural, cultural and economic context (Kittredge, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

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The Community Forest “Šumska zajednica Beočin” was established in 1903 and has remained active since then, despite all of the changes that have taken place in Serbia. This could be promoted as a successful example of cooperation.

The members of the Beočin forest community are volunteers driven by tradition, heritage and moral obligation towards their ancestors; this unique approach should be supported to enable it to continue into the future.

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