

**THE NETWORK OF YOUNG FORESTERS IN GERMANY:
LIVING LINKAGES BETWEEN HIGHER FORESTRY
EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE**

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THE NETWORK OF YOUNG FORESTERS IN GERMANY: LIVING LINKAGES BETWEEN HIGHER FORESTRY EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

Founded in 2017, the Junges Netzwerk Forst [JNF; Young Forestry Network] is a network of young foresters including students, graduates, and young professionals up to age 40 in Germany. It has been established as the youth organisation of the German Forestry Association (Deutscher Forstverein e.V., DFV), which is one of the largest and oldest associations in the field of forestry in Germany. The JNF was founded to act as a networking platform for all protagonists and with the aim of giving young foresters a voice. Due to the great generation change in the forestry sector, an exchange of experience between the generations but also within the younger generation is necessary. This dialogue is enabled through various excursions, lectures and seminars organised by the members themselves or the parent organisation DFV. The great proactive and self-organized attitude of the members underscores the great demand of young foresters to exchange ideas and create a network.

Keywords: German forest association, networking, students, practical experience,

Introduction

The German Forestry Association (DFV, Deutscher Forstverein e.V.), founded in 1899, existed without a youth section for almost 120 years. Young people up to the age of 40 were underrepresented in the German Forestry Association resulting in a right-skewed age distribution. Due to the poor job prospects that prevailed in the forestry sector for a long time, the willingness to join forestry associations was very low and not attractive for young people.

Fortunately, the job situation has improved enormously in recent years despite staff cutbacks, hence a generation change is imminent in many forestry enterprises. The report on the state of Europe's forests stated that about 30 % of employees in forest-related jobs in Europe are 49 years old or older (Forest Europe, 2015) – this share still rising (UNECE/FAO Forestry and Timber Section, 2018). To avoid a loss of knowledge with retiring personnel, there must be a transfer of knowledge between the generations. At the same time, the attractiveness for young people to get involved in forestry associations has increased enormously due to the greater number of jobs available in traditional forestry professions (Liebal and Weber, 2016). However, a youth organisation for foresters was missing until 2017.

This paper points out how the gap of a youth organisation was filled by the establishment of the JNF. In addition to outlining the foundation of the JNF, the following will present and discuss the aims of the JNF, its member structure, and experiences during the first years.

Foundation of the network

Given the initial situation described above, the idea of founding a youth organisation as a network was developed by two young forestry professionals. As the concept of an association did not seem to be attractive for the young generation due to rigid structures, such as elections, association statutes and fixed memberships, a non-formal association in the form of a network was chosen. The JNF was founded in Regensburg, Germany in May 2017 on the initiative of Felix Ludwig Hofmann and Alexander Stute. The organization's goals and principles were determined in initial workshops: The JNF defines itself as a meeting place for young forestry professionals (< 40 years old) in Germany. As the youth organisation of the DFV, the JNF receives financial and conceptual support. In return, the JNF members familiarise themselves with the DFV, its programme offers and can join it – at the latest at the age of 40.

The JNF is politically independent. It is solely dedicated to forestry and career-oriented topics across all forest ownership types and professional groups. All members are invited to contribute ideas and personal initiative to ensure the further development of the JNF. The network cultivates an honest and open discussion culture – both, within the network itself and between JNF and DFV. "Young topics" such as career opportunities, career choice, career entry and compatibility of career and family are given space for discussion and impulses. The young foresters are to be connected to each other. In addition to maintaining contacts, the JNF serves the exchange of knowledge and experience e.g. with excursions, talks and events. The special bond between youth and parent organisation results in a bridge between the generations.

Organisation and members

The JNF is organized in accordance with the DFV. Corresponding to the regional forestry associations, eleven regional representatives are available as contact persons for questions and concerns regarding the JNF (www.forstverein.de/). Among other things, they take up regional issues, support the implementation of regional network meetings, organize information events and bring young people's issues to the attention of the regional forestry associations. Many of the regional JNF representatives have been accepted into the advisory board of the respective regional forestry associations.

Student university representatives are also involved at the eight forestry university locations in Germany (Eberswalde, Erfurt, Dresden, Freiburg, Göttingen (both university and university of applied sciences), Munich, Weihenstephan and

Rottenburg). They make a significant contribution to active member recruitment, for example by organizing regular information events.

Membership of the JNF is open to anyone up to the age of 40 who is working in the forestry sector, has recently completed or is currently pursuing forestry related education. The age limit of 40 years was set because it is assumed that at this age everyone has completed their education and professional orientation. The JNF has gained 820 members within three years. There is an average increase of about five members per week. Analysing the JNF membership structure,

Figure 1 shows the age distribution of the members. Compared to the age distribution of members in the DFV, there is a clearly right-skewed distribution. The average age of the members is 27.5 years. The youngest member is 17 years old. A share of women of 30% (Figure 1) is particularly pleasing in terms of the gender balance in the forestry sector, as women only account for about 20% of forestry jobs. Nevertheless, Liebal and Weber (2016) showed that 36% of forestry university graduates were female. Here, an attempt should be made to adjust the proportion.

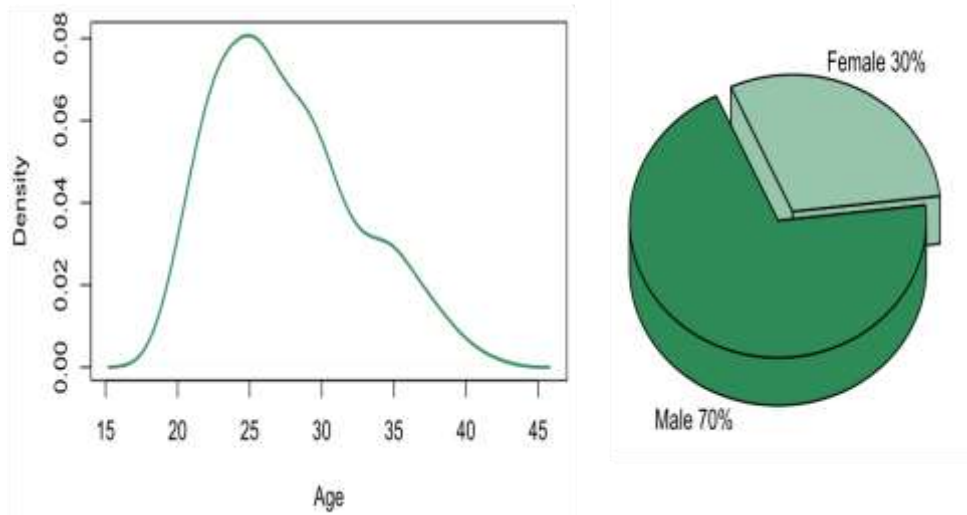


Figure 1: Age distribution (left) and gender distribution of the members (right).

The analysis of the current employment of members provides further insights into the membership structure: Almost 59% of the members are students of universities and universities of applied sciences (Figure 2) since their members can be easily recruited. At the same time, this underlines that students have a great interest in building up a professional network. Once people are at work it is harder to reach them. The JNF reckons that in the near future, when current student-members of the network will be distributed throughout various professions of the sector, they will spread awareness about the network. The professional activity of the members is diverse and ranges from forest workers to foresters in management and science. JNF members are employed in state forestry operations, private forestry operations, ministries and in

consulting companies. 41% of the members are already working in forestry and gain initial experience (Figure 2): some in management positions, some self-employed, some do traineeships, some work as scientists. A comparison with other studies on university graduates is not possible, as students and forest workers were included in this analysis. However, it is noticeable that the proportion of scientists is probably somewhat lower than mentioned in Liebal and Weber (2016), which did not include graduates of universities of applied science while the proportion of employees in classic forestry professions is higher.

However, it is evident that the network represents people from all professional groups. Furthermore, Figure 2 indicates a living link between young professionals on the one hand and students of universities and universities of applied sciences on the other hand. This provides a great opportunity to share professional experiences and give advice on career options. Based on the membership structure, a high diversity of professions, age and gender obviously bring along many ideas and opportunities for exchange.

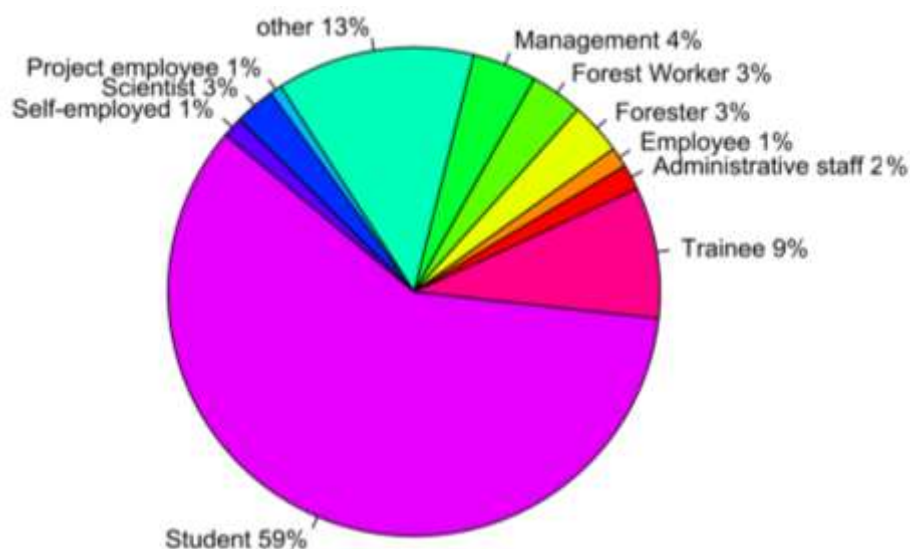


Figure 2: Distribution of professions of JNF members.

Corresponding to the increased recruitment of members at universities and universities of applied sciences, a regional distribution of members in Germany is evident (Figure 3). In the regional groups, where there are two universities or universities of applied sciences with higher forestry study programmes, the number of members is significantly higher (Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, North-West Germany). The regional groups with one university of applied sciences or university

(Sachsen, Thüringen, Brandenburg) show higher numbers of members compared to regional groups without.

However, after graduation, people are distributed widely throughout Germany and members are found in all federal states. The distribution of members in the federal states without a university indicates a slight tendency towards the availability of jobs in these states. Further analysis on this would be desirable. In the future, further recruitment of members should be sought in these federal states.

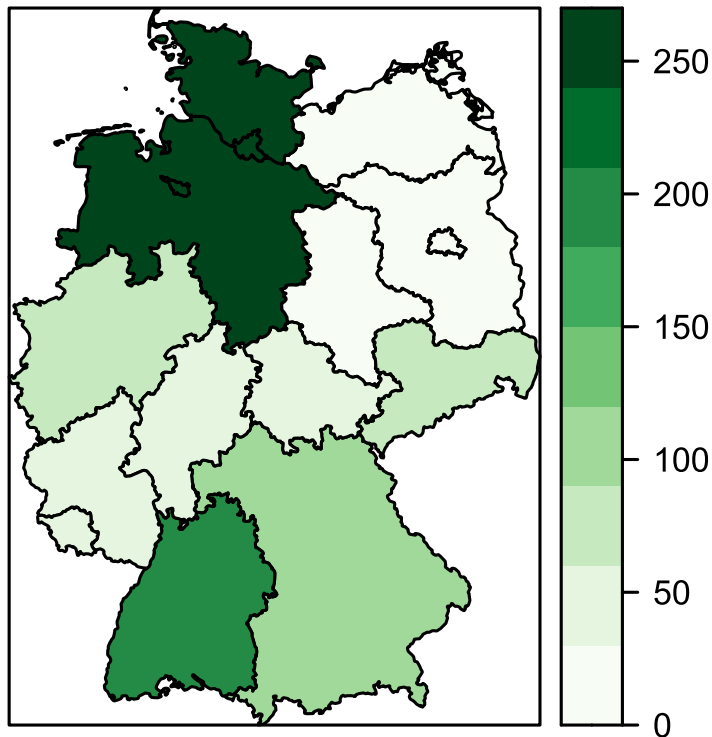


Figure 3: Geographical distribution of the number of members in the 11 regional groups. (Berlin & Brandenburg; Rheinland-Pfalz & Saarland; Niedersachsen, Hamburg, Bremen & Schleswig-Holstein are combined into one regional group each).

Events and actions - How does it work in practice?

At the heart of the JNF is the member list, which is accessible to all members. Contact details of all members can be viewed, enabling fast and easy networking. Access is ensured via a password-protected cloud. Members gave permission for sharing this information. The member list is updated on a monthly basis. Many members make use of the list for internships, during their traineeship, or to organize excursions. Since

not all members have access to social media, internal communication takes place via a mailing list. Members are informed about JNF activities at regular intervals.

Continuing education is one of the main pillars of the JNF. Particularly at the beginning of a career, one is dependent on a regular exchange with colleagues in the same field. This exchange is supported by networking. In addition to the biennial conference at the federal level (alternating with the DFV's conference), regional network meetings are organized regularly. Those events are held during the year at the local level with the aim of introducing participants to each other and exchanging information on current regional and national forestry issues. For this reason, the regional network meetings serve not only to provide professional training, but also to allow members to exchange ideas. Different event formats like joint excursions, indoor lectures, small conferences or social evenings are suitable for this purpose. In addition to topics of interest for the younger generation, emphasis is always placed on the exchange between the younger and older forestry generation. In the face of a massive generation change, benefiting from the knowledge of experienced colleagues is to be institutionalized through the JNF and DFV. Regular get-togethers have been organized for this purpose. At these informal meetings, an exchange with the older generation is fostered especially by the convivial nature of these gatherings.

Forest professionals from all types of forest ownership, forestry experts, from science, education, different stakeholder groups, timber marketing and wood processing are invited to attend the regional network meetings. So far, 45 regional network meetings have taken place, with an average of about 20 participants, bringing together a large number of people. This dynamic shows how many young forestry professionals have already been introduced to each other. A diverse range of topics have been discussed at regional network meetings up to this point: company and product presentations, excursions to private and state forestry enterprises, digitization in forestry, hunting, forest conservation, and exchange of experiences for starting a career or career options.

The 2018 federal conference in Buchenbühl was held under the motto "Let's talk - communication builds bridges". Topics such as public relations in forestry, conflict management in everyday working life, and leadership of employees as young managers were addressed by selected experts from science, practice, and administration. With 80 participants, the 2018 conference attracted great interest and was fully booked. The content of the seminars is indicative of what topics members would like to learn more about:

- Communication models.
- Communication about one's own work.
- Leadership tasks.
- Modern personnel management.
- Assessment centre training.

These topics indicate a need for more transferable skills in addition to contents of the current curricula of higher educational institutions.

The 2020 federal conference with the title *Confidently developing the forest of tomorrow (Glück auf - Voll Zuversicht den Wald von morgen gestalten)* was planned to take place in Münchhof near Seesen (Northern Germany) and focus on the challenges and opportunities following calamity events. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic (sic!) and associated restrictions, the conference was postponed to 2022.

Within the framework of the DFV's conferences, the JNF is involved in the programme planning and design, in order to facilitate the inclusion of young topics and thus actively reduce the participants' age average -in the sense of generation exchange. This was impressively demonstrated at the 2019 DFV meeting in Dresden, where new programme items such as the science slam (see Box I) or the forester party were successfully introduced.

Box I: Science Slams

Originating in traditional poetry slams, in a science slam, scientists compete for the audience's favour in a short 10-minute talk. The speakers must succeed in presenting scientific research and findings in a clear, entertaining and, at best, funny way. The winner of the first science slam was Anne Austen, a forestry student, with her interesting and witty presentation on "Forest dieback".

Besides contributing to the conferences programme, incentives to participate were created in the form of a JNF discount, discounted accommodation and sponsored bus transfers for JNF members. For the meeting in Braunschweig in 2022, the JNF again is going to participate with young topics in terms of the programme content.

Conclusion

The previous analysis demonstrates the rapid dynamic the JNF took on during the first few years after its creation. The large number of members indicates the great demand of students and young foresters for a networking opportunity.

The membership analysis points at the diverse composition of the JNF members. The large proportion of students will probably even out somewhat in the coming years, as the network ages with its members. The proportion of women members compared to the overall gender distribution of the forestry sector is good but should be further increased. This diverse membership structure has proven to be very enriching for the exchange among the members.

The internal communication and the variety of events offer a high potential for the exchange between professional practice and students of universities and universities of applied sciences. The integration of JNF into DFV also provides the opportunity to establish an exchange between generations, institutionalizing intergenerational knowledge transfer.

For the JNF's future development, it is expected that the number of members will continue to increase. Digital events will be provided to complement analogue events in times of contact restrictions and beyond. Through online presentations, exciting topics can be presented with little effort and members can network without geographic constraint. In the next amendment of the DFV statutes, JNF will be given a voice in the DFV bodies. This will allow the interests of the young people to be directly represented in the DFV. Overall, JNF has accomplished a lot in its young years and has proven to be a successful model for networking of young foresters, securing the future of the forestry sector in Germany.

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