



Metla still issues some paper publications, but has moved more and more to electronic media. Erkki Kauhanen with some of the physical output. Photo: Mats Hannerz

## Communication pays off

**Science needs to be communicated. The more targeted the communication, the higher the impact. And the higher the impact, the better the justification for conducting the research.**

News & Views met Dr. Erkki Kauhanen, who is the head of the communication department at the Finnish Forest Research Institute (Metla). In his position, he has the tough job of optimising communication of the results produced by about 370 scientists.

He argues for allocating more resources to communication. An optimal balance between science and communication would be for example 70/30, but today more than 90% of resources are dedicated to the research work.

– It is sub-optimal to cut down resources for communication. Unfortunately, this is what is usually

done when budgets are slimmed down. We would gain more from doing the opposite, he says.

His arguments are, in short, that research has no impact on society unless the results are communicated and become more widely known. Well-targeted communication pays off by generating more funding. A good example is *Worldwatch Institute* which is unbelievably influential compared to its small staff.

### The long tail of a scientific project

An organisation such as Metla produces a mass of research results, some of which are only disseminated in scientific articles.

–We could, in theory, stop doing research for ten years, and still have enough results to communicate and implement, he says provocatively.

Such a move would of course not be realistic, but still he wants more awareness of the need to communicate a research project from a longer-term

perspective. He talks about the long tail following a research result.

– We know that it usually takes a few years before a new finding hits the ground and starts to be known by the practitioners, he says. A research project must be prepared to continue communication also for several years after the scientific part of it is completed.

### From paper to electronics

Erkki Kauhanen has led Metla's communication department for six years, and he has seen a rapid shift in the media used for communication over that short time.

– We are definitely moving from printed to electronic publications. Our previous magazine *Forest Research (Metsäntutkimus)* was closed down. Today, we rely to a large extent on electronic newsletters and social media, he says.

Each newsletter has its own target group and, in all, 15 regular



Erkki Kauhanen demonstrates how the output from research can be optimised with a balance of 70% science and 30% communication. Photo: Mats Hannerz

newsletters are issued: two in English, one in Swedish and 13 in Finnish. Information in newsletters and research reports is often taken care of by other organisations, such as Tapio, who process it and adapt it to create guidance for forest owners or other practitioners through their own channels.

### **Paid for by the people**

So, what is the main target group for Metla's research? Erkki Kauhanen would like to rank the people of Finland near the top. They are the ones who pay, directly through taxes or indirectly, for the research. The politicians represent the people, therefore they are a very important target group.

– We involve politicians and other decision makers in many of

our research projects. They may participate in steering committees, take part in seminars or receive our newsletters.

Other target groups vary between research projects. Some programmes are directed towards industry, others to the scientific community and some to the practical forestry sector.

Are the researchers aware of the need to communicate? Yes and no, according to Erkki Kauhanen. He considers Metla's professors to be good communicators. Some scientists may be resistant to meeting the media, but once they have been pushed to be "on the air", they become dedicated to it. And their communication has a good reach in the media. At least 5-10 newspaper clippings about Metla's research are collected each day.

## **Research must be implemented**

**“The problem is not the amount of research, but the long time it takes for the results to reach practitioners. New findings must be implemented. That is what we pay for.”**

Liisa Saarenmaa is councillor at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, which is financing the Finnish Forest Research Institute (Metla). The ministry uses Metla's expertise to deliver strategically important information on forest economics, biodiversity, climate and other current topics. And they allocate a lot of money to the institute, which has an annual budget of 40 million Euro (private and public funding together).

She is not convinced that more applicable results would be produced if there was more money. Instead, research needs to find its way out to companies, new products and new methods in the forest sector.

– We are missing a link between research and those who would use



Liisa Saarenmaa sees a missing link between research and the field. Photo: Mats Hannerz

the results. We have discussed this missing link for 20 years, but still haven't found a good solution, she says. A more lively interaction between researchers and the society

would benefit both parties and produce more societal impact.

An example of such a link is the Forest Development Centre Tapio, which produces practical guidelines for foresters based on Metla's research. However, Liisa Saarenmaa would like to see more developed procedures to implement the scientific results in both the forestry and the forest industry.

Metla's researchers publish their results in international journals of high quality, but it does not necessarily mean a high societal impact. Liisa Saarenmaa sees a contradiction in the rating system of universities and institutes, and the knowledge transfer.

– We should perhaps find other criteria to measure research impact. Communication and implementation are also important, she says.