# StarTree in Latvia

*StarTree is Reforesting Scotland's new project on non-wood forest products. The latest 'Knowledge Exchange Event' was hosted by Latvia, a land half-covered by forests, some of them primal and untouched. Project Manager, Emma Chapman, was expecting wilderness... instead, the first stop was suburbia.*

Run from a large house, with a moderate garden and a well-appointed shed out the back, Pinumu Pasaule [1] is a family business employing several people, simply making baskets. They grow the willow themselves and also process it, boiling it in a wood-fired vat behind the shed and sitting on the patio to strip it. They used to forage all their willow, then as the business expanded they created a plantation - but again just using cuttings from the wild, rather than buying named varieties.

Basketmakers in Scotland find it impossible to earn a living from the basic craft, however skilled they are. Time is too expensive; goods are too cheap. To make money you have to teach, create one-offs for fundable organisations or projects, gain a reputation as an artist or designer. Pinumu Pasaule stresses the quality of its work compared with Chinese imports, but otherwise seems immune to these pressures, and the workers don't see themselves or sell themselves as artists. They have had work commissioned for an exhibition in Japan, and for interior design, but they just charge for the time each basket takes. Pinumu Pasaule offers a repair service as well, sometimes restoring old pieces of other families' history.

With these insights - and a basket or two - we piled back into coaches, leaving the outskirts of Riga and battering on down the main road. At last we turned down a dirt track, in a wide expanse of big, open fields. (Much of Europe is astonishingly flat - who knew?!). We got out, gratefully accepting bottled water and snacks from the boot of a car which blocked the way ahead. Nibbling, I surveyed the fringes of trees on the horizon. Odd to have the break now, but surely soon we'll be driven to our final destination... then the coaches backed away down the track, our guide closed the boot of his car, and we walked across the fields.

## A use for everything

We stopped at a deer fence surrounding a field of young saplings - an experimental plantation. Our guide spoke of biomass yields from the trees, and from the red canary grass planted between some of the rows. He described how they cut down the aspens, grinding up leaves, bark and all. The resulting granules aren't good fuel, because they produce so much ash, but there is a market for them, even export, with uses such as rabbit food and rabbit bedding. We wandered between the rows, discussing other possibilities - extracting salicylic acid from the aspen, perhaps? - drifting towards the 'you coulds' and 'maybes' to which non-wood forest products (NWFPs) are prone.

After this brief, rather sterile visit, we spent the afternoon back indoors at the Latvian State Forest Research Institute, SILAVA, where everything began to make sense. Two family businesses gave fascinating presentations. The first, Dabas Dobe [2], makes 'sparkling birch juice'. Latvians traditionally drink birch sap as a spring tonic. Tapped before the flush of spring leaves, birch juice is a source of winter-scarce nutrients. The season, however, is short. Slightly sugary water doesn't keep... but it can be fermented. Over two generations, Ervins Labandovskis' family have developed their recipe: a little extra sugar, a few days at a moderate temperature, producing a faintly sparkling drink, fermented just enough to preserve it - similar to our elderflower champagne, but light instead of sweet, and tasting not of heady midsummer but of the cool early stirrings of a spring birch woodland. It tasted of trees; I loved it. Ervins is taking the next step, marketing the drink through his shop in Riga, but it is still made by his family at their 'country house'. He is looking to export - interested shops or restaurants please get in touch!

Above: Dabas Dobe's birch juice. Photo: Dabas Dobe.

Loreta Pižika and her husband followed a different route to family business. They left high-flying city jobs to live as a young family in the country, taking their urban business flair and presentation skills with them. Daba Laba (which means 'good nature') is a nature tourism company offering team building, photo hunting, traditional longbow skills and hunting. Averse to waste, Loreta looked at the boar bristles left over after the meat was taken, and another business was born. 'Wild Good' [3] hairbrushes are finely-crafted luxury items, designed to last and marketed worldwide. Like the basketmakers, Daba Laba has to compete with cheap Chinese imports and does so on grounds of quality. Long-lasting wild bristles, a carefully-thought-out design using small-scale machining and hand-finishing to make a water-resistant brush. By the end of the presentation they were selling well!

Next up was Biolat, a state-owned offshoot of SILAVA [4]. Biolat uses steam distillation followed by solvents to extract compounds from tree foliage - the residues of timber harvesting - then finds a fabulous range of uses for them. Plant food, therapeutic bath essence, vitamin supplements for livestock feed... We crowded into the lab, viewed the equipment, and tasted a bitter green health drink and some candies. The latter are, I think, recommended for sore throats. They taste compellingly of conifers; an essence of Latvia encapsulated in sugar.

A presentation from Latvijas Valsts Meži (LVM), the state forestry company,

helped tie all my impressions together. Latvian independence is very recent history; the company was formed in 1999. LVM has 1,002 employees, managing 1.37 million hectares of forest in a country with 56 per cent forest cover. Its turnover in 2012 was 253 million euros, mostly from roundwood and standing timber, fuel chips, seeds and plants and mineral resources. Other income is from recreation and hunting. A 2011 survey found significant use of NWFPs, especially fungi, but personal consumption accounted for most of this harvest, with only 13 per cent reaching the market. (At last, a parallel with Scotland!). Subject to some basic principles of care, everyone has the right to gather from state forests, generating no revenue for LVM. Its NWFP income instead comes largely from hunting licences, decorative foliage, and Christmas trees. Biolat's insistent search for new products suddenly made a lot of sense.

## Changing lifestyles

I had travelled to Riga by bus. This cost me time, hopefully saved carbon, and brought a huge reward: a detailed, intimate view of the landscape around me. From Poland onwards I saw new development on plots in the towns, new glitzy businesses at likely spots along the main road, and abandoned land and old-looking houses in more remote parts. In Riga, colleagues confirmed my impressions: people are leaving former land-based lifestyles and looking for opportunities in the cities. The experimental plantation, mostly focused on biomass, was looking to find ways of using land no longer intensively worked by owner-occupiers.

The family businesses we had seen are another part of the same picture. The basketmakers have their workshop and processing units in their house and garden in Riga, but they grow their willow outwith the city. Loreta Pižika and her husband turned their talents to finding a way to live as a young family on their patch, making the entire rural-to-urban-to-rural transition in just a generation or two. In yet another way, the birch sap business of the Labandovskis family was also tying their country and city lives and businesses together.

On reflection, I understood and appreciated the design of this trip. I didn't get to visit romantic wilderness, but in a brief few hours I met some of the people who own, use and manage Latvia's forests, and gained a basic grounding of the economics, land ownership and changing lifestyles that shape their interactions with the land. StarTree is working as planned!

These trips are the highlight of StarTree work. Day-to-day tasks continue in between; recently I have been helping with preparations for the initial StarTree survey of NWFP use in Scotland, and making plans for the first meeting of our own Regional Stakeholders' Group. In October I'll travel to Portugal. My colleagues there are very proud of their cork oaks, but we will be too late in the year to see them harvested - next Journal, I'll report back on what we do see!

1. www.pinumupasaule.lv
2. www.dabasdobe.lv
3. www.wildgood.lv
4. www.silava.lv

**www.star-tree.eu**

***Emma Chapman*** *is Reforesting Scotland's Project Manager for StarTree, a pan-European project to support the sustainable exploitation of forest resources for rural development. E: startree@reforestingscotland.org*