Article


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Abstract: The aim of this article is to present the funding sources and scale of the expenditure for the educational activity provided by Promotional Forest Complexes (PFCs) in the context of sustainable development. Apart from a number of significant economic functions, the State Forests in Poland perform important social functions, including the function of nature and forest education. Economic functions bring profit, while social functions are not subject to such commercialization. The execution of the social functions of Poland’s forests is dealt with by special organizational units, called Promotional Forest Complexes (PFCs). PFCs have suitable educational facilities at their disposal, enabling them to perform their tasks (e.g., education sites, nature exhibition rooms, forest teaching shelters, educational trails). Running these facilities involves certain transaction costs, which are covered from the PFCs’ own resources. The educational activity is partly financed from external sources. This analysis indicates that we could observe a decrease in internal and external resources dedicated to the nature and forest education of the society. The authors carried out the secondary materials analysis concerning the object of study, as well as the analysis of scientific literature and statistical analysis.

Keywords: Promotional Forest Complexes; nature and forest education; funding sources; expenditure; sustainable development; Poland

1. Introduction

In Poland, forests cover 29.6% of the country’s land area. State-owned forests make up 76.9% of all forests. Forests belonging to national parks constitute 2%. Commune forests makeup about 1%, while other state treasury forests make up 1.1%. Moreover, private forests in Poland constitute 18.1% in the ownership structure. Forests represent unique economic, medicinal, protective, recreational, and educational values, which satisfy the needs of the society. In this article, it is assumed that the State Forests National Forest Holding (the State Forests) fulfil a wide range of the society’s educational needs, particularly in the area of nature education and ecology. To cater for these needs, the State Forests established special organizational units, i.e., Promotional Forest Complexes (PFCs). PFCs primary...
task is to promote the social functions of forests and demonstrate methods for improving sustainable development and a multifunctional forest economy. Thus, the aim of the article is to identify and analyze the main sources of funding allotted to PFCs educational function from 2012 to 2016. Herein, we considered the concept of sustainable development.

The term “education” is derived from the Latin word *educatio*, which refers to the process of upbringing and a wide range of schooling activities, such as developing and strengthening school systems, educational entities, and improving teaching quality [1]. Education and knowledge acquisition is a primary focus in both the development of societies and individuals alike. Its objective is to prepare people for professional and economic activity and to help them achieve personal and public goals. The educational process also involves passing on the cultural heritage of past generations, which is essential for the developmental integrity of contemporary and future societies.

Education is a continuous and institutionalized process, an all-embracing domain of public life. Continual or occasional education, self-teaching, upbringing, and self-education that is more or less organized with great or weak intensity, pertains to children, teenagers, adults, and elderly people. Everybody must learn, update their knowledge, and increase or change their qualifications, which makes education a permanent human process [1]. Continuous education, also referred to as life-long learning, becomes the basic resource of a society and an economy based on knowledge [2]. It is an investment in the human capital, which contributes to the implementation of sustainable development strategy.

According to the Lisbon Strategy, the aim of life-long education is to invest in the human capital by developing educational systems and vocational training, as well as strengthening the links between schools and other educational entities. What is important in this process is adjusting the needs and effects of education to the work market. Additionally, society’s expectations must adjust from new educational needs and trends in a modern civilization [3].

The educational process is shaped by various institutions and programs. The function of these institutions is presented in the McKinsey 7S model [4], which consists of soft and hard elements, as well as tools used for achieving goals. The main elements of educational institutions are soft components, i.e., educational staff and teachers’ motivation, knowledge, work experience, education, and care for the values that define the mission of the institutions they serve. The values these institutions profess obligate their personnel to incorporate them into their students’ life (e.g., treating the forest as a common good, caring for ecology, acting ethically). The next soft element is the “outward” mode of activity, i.e., trust, cooperation, tradition, symbols, legal, and ethical norms. The last soft element of an institution includes knowledge, employee and manager skill-level, efficiency, effectiveness, rationality, and economic activity. This element helps develop answers to questions like: “Is what is done by the institution valuable and good?”; “Does it comply with its mission and expectations?”; “Is it effective?”

In the model, the hard elements for an educational institution include the following: its strategy, which contains the description of goals that need to be achieved; the methods of achieving these goals; and the structural organization with its hierarchy of positions, organizational units, and the relationships among them. Structural organization has an influence on the internal and external communication, as well as management style. The last element of an educational organization is the system, which consists of three factors:

1. Internal policy (e.g., procedures of education and employees’ development, motivation to work);
2. Physical work environment (e.g., rooms, furnishing, safety and health conditions, location);
3. Social work environment (e.g., promotion, assessment, atmosphere at work, conflicts) [2].

The institutional approach to education indicates that in the conditions of economic, social, and ecological globalization, free market and competition, educational services have become a commodity. They are subject to commercialization and require funding; they may or may not bring profits, regardless of whether they are provided by public or private institutions.
2. Materials and Methods

This article presents an analysis of the funding sources and expenditure structure over the studied period (2012–2016). Additionally, this study examines the pace and changing direction of individual sources of financial means for nature and forest education. The authors point to the important role of this education in the implementation of the sustainable development strategy by Poland’s State Forests. The research methods used for this article included a secondary material analysis, a literature review, and a statistical analysis [5,6]. The authors were guided by the basic directive of empirical study, which simultaneously uses several mutually complementary methods. This approach allowed the authors to avoid the negative effects of the methods and achieve more objective results. They also intended to indicate that in contemporary empirical studies, scientists frequently use secondary data and materials collected by other researchers, in addition to official documentation owned by various institutions that conduct similar research for purposes other than those set by a given researcher. Performing an analysis of the empirical data provided by secondary materials has three basic advantages. Firstly, there are more wider ranging data, which allows the researcher to conduct a more in-depth analysis than it would be possible in the case of primary data, acquired during one, short-term study. Secondly, researchers may use secondary data in conjunction with the data they collected themselves, by means of observation or during interviews. Thirdly, there is the economic aspect; primary data collection is a costly undertaking, while using the already existing resources is cheaper than running one’s own empirical studies [7]. The arguments listed above encouraged the authors to employ the method of secondary materials analysis, including official documents in the form of reports on the condition of forests in Poland and on the educational activity conducted by the State Forests in 2012–2016.

In the theoretical-empirical study of the research, the researchers undertook a literature analysis and statistical analysis, then presented the quantitative characteristics of the studied issue. The research methods used in the study provided information about internal and external sources of financing Poland’s nature and forest education and was conducted by the State Forests in the context of sustainable development. The study also enlarged the scope of issues for further study.

3. Study Area: Promotional Forest Complexes (PFCs) in Poland

Promotional Forest Complexes (PFCs) are functional units of the State Forests National Forest Holding [8]. They are entities of great ecological, educational, and social importance, constituted by large, compact forested areas, belonging to one or several forest districts, in order to popularize the state’s ecological forest policy. Creating these areas was connected with promoting the state’s sustainable development [9].

At present, there are 25 PFCs in Poland (Scheme 1), the earliest of which were established in 1994 and the latest in 2011. In 2016, they covered the total area of 1,273,693 hectares. PFCs are an original Polish idea of promoting ecological forestry. Its only counterpart in Europe is the Swedish concept of a model forest, and outside of Europe, there is a similar Canadian initiative. However, these concepts are not the same as Poland’s PFCs [10,11]. Thus, it is worth emphasizing here that the idea of PFCs was appreciated by European foresters and researchers [12].

PFCs are functional units without separate administration. They are administered by the head foresters of the forest districts they encompass and are under the supervision of the heads of respective State Forests Regional Directorates-General. The task of the foresters working within the framework of PFCs is to demonstrate the changeability of habitat conditions, the diversity of species found in the forest, and the multitude of functions performed by forests. They are also able to promote a sustainable forest economy by supporting research and providing forest education for different social groups. The main objective of these organizational-functional units is to stimulate activities aiming at comprehensive recognition of the conditions needed to preserve the natural environment, as well as to improve the methods of a sustainable and multifunctional forest economy. This guarantees steady development of natural forest assets. The priorities of the PFCs also include popularizing knowledge about nature conservation and ecologically conducted economic activity [13]. An example
is the ecological education of the society, which has flourished for several years due to the activity of
the forest districts constituting PFCs [14]. Nature and forest education conducted by PFCs perfectly
fits into education for sustainable development.

Scheme 1. The administrative division of the State Forests in Poland (condition 1.01.2014). Sources:
The State Forests National Forest Holding.

One of the state institutions responsible for nature education are PFCs. They correspond to
the McKinsey “7S” model of education organization. They have their own organizational structure
and education facilities and they cooperate with their external environment. Thus, they form an
institution of considerable social, ecological, cultural, educational, and scientific significance. They
comprise environmental education centers, nature exhibition rooms, teaching shelters (so called
“green schools”), educational trails, educational points, dendrology parks, gardens, and overnight
accommodation facilities.

PFCs employ competent and educated workers who value the forest, both its fruits and ecology.
These values are the focal point of nature and forest education. It provides knowledge about forest
management, nature conservation, continuous use of forest resources, the stability of the forest economy,
and the promotion of the ecological and multifunctional role of the forest, aiming especially at children
and adolescents. The basic feature of the nature and forest education provided by PFCs, compared to
other institutions (e.g., Green Schools), is that it is mostly not subject to the rules of commercialization
and it does not bring financial profits. The free nature and forest education provided by PFCs involves
purposeful, conscious, planned, and organized promotion of knowledge about forest environment and
sustainable forest economy. This is done to raise awareness among various social groups that rational
and responsible use of the forest is paramount, as is building trust with the forest institution and its
employees. In order to provide nature and forest education, the Promotional Forest Complexes use all
the necessary elements and tools of an educational institution, according to the Mc Kinsey “7S” model.

The aim of the education provided by PFC employees is to develop ecological awareness among
Polish society by teaching them how to better interact with the forest. This can be accomplished
by developing a comprehensive and rational cooperation with nature protection organizations and
ecological associations [15].
PFCs use modern, innovative, and verified educational forms and methods that are harmless to the forest environment. The main educational methods used by foresters include outdoor classes; guided excursions; lessons in nature exhibition rooms; meetings with foresters in and outside school; educational campaigns and events; exhibitions; forest competitions; and feast and educational fairs. Presented in Figure 1 are these various Polish forest education methods.

As a result, the process of providing educational services is smooth and effective, representing a high standard of teaching and responding to the aims set by these institutions. Further, the educational activity of PFCs is directed to all social groups [16]. It contributes to the process of learning and self-teaching; it serves the purpose of discovering nature, enhancing individual social development, and encouraging and motivating people to adopt proper ethical values and moral norms towards the forest. PFCs demonstrate how to implement sustainable development in society, which combines sustainable behaviors in the macro- and micro-systems of the society, economy, and nature.

The aim of this concept is to eliminate or at least reduce the imbalance between economic and social development, and between socioeconomic and natural development. Its implementation is to prevent destructive social, economic, and ecological unrest. As J. Sachs rightly remarks, “Presently, the world is on the unsustainable development trajectory, ecologically, demographically, and economically. This means that if we continue to act like this (...), we will fall victim to a social and ecological crisis with catastrophic consequences” [17].

Implementing the idea of sustainable development requires not only action inside social, economic, and natural systems, but developing proper relationships among them. Here are some examples of activities that aim to improve the internal functioning of these systems, which aspire to develop cooperation among them:
• In the social system: democratization and decentralization of power and management tools; raising the awareness of the need to skillfully manage the natural environment; developing ecological education; and health protection.

• In the economic system: using processes that make production and products more ecological; implementing quality and natural environment management projects, including those related to forests; promoting healthy and rational models of consumption; and financing sustainable development.

• In the environmental system: creating a spatial order that takes into account nature, the flow of information, energy, and knowledge of the natural world; reducing water pollution; and promoting ecological behaviors [18].

The paradigm of sustainable development involves searching for and using knowledge that concerns economic development, the society’s standard of living, preservation of natural resources for future generations (preservation of forest permanence included), and the rational forest economy. In the social approach to sustainable development, it is assumed that knowledge and education play an important role. They should be used to explain that societies must accept the priority of ecological requirements, which must not be overshadowed by civilizational, cultural, and economic development. Culture and economy must remain in a state of equilibrium and symbiosis with nature, in addition to caring about future environmental consequences of present activities, which in turn is to care about the needs and health of future generations. In T. Borys’ words, sustainable development is a kind of development that ensures integrated order as a target system, in which social, economic, and environmental orders are coherently internalized [19]. Therefore, in the opinion of J. and S. Famielec, the paradigm of sustainable development requires revising the goals and strategies, verification of activities, their measurement, and their execution and responsibility for them. What is needed is the courage to stop subordinating developmental changes solely for the economic growth. It is not right to be singularly concerned with investment ratings and success measured only with profit. The sustainable development paradigm needs to be broadly related to knowledge, education, and upbringing. Acting with the interests of a good social, economic, and environmental future requires integration of interdisciplinary knowledge [20]. This basic condition that needs to be fulfilled to achieve the goals of sustainable development was presented in the Brundtland Report. Not only did the report popularize the idea of sustainable development and make people realize that a healthy economy depends on the environment but it also indicated that environmental policy must be incorporated into the general economic and educational policy [21].

Moreover, there are critical opinions concerning the implementation of the sustainable development concept. According to K. Zimniewicz, the world seen from the sustainable development perspective is beautiful and attractive. The vision shows the world without poverty and wars, full of harmony between life and nature, without artificial borders between independent states. It always concerns the future and refers to human desires, expectations, or dreams [22]. In fact, as the same author remarks, the contemporary world has to deal with economic and political problems, armed conflicts and a crisis of values. The predominant trend is neoliberal ideology, with its continuous pursuit of profit and greediness, which is the highest value in business. The disrespect of moral norms and no sense of responsibility for another human being and the condition of the natural environment are overwhelming [22].

Implementing the rules of sustainable development is connected with another important problem, which is the transaction costs, i.e., the costs of the functioning of an integrated economic, social, and natural order. Sustainable development costs are particularly high, because they encompass, among other things, the creation of new and reformation of the already existing social, political, economic, and natural environment institutions. The category of transaction costs includes collecting information about the society, economy, and environment, holding public consultations, introducing legal regulations, conducting educational, information and promotional activity, and checking if the rules of sustainable development and law are being respected [23].
The methods to reduce the transaction costs of implementing sustainable development include promoting knowledge and education and shaping society’s ecological awareness. Educating the society and what educational strategy is implemented are extremely important for the sustainable development principles to be effectively implemented. It is not about traditional ecological education, but about education for the purpose of permanent development, which is broadly profiled and considering the relationship between ecology and the reason and culture. This means that ecological rationality should also include emotions, feelings, passions, values, and behavioral norms [24]. In this way, one is able to be a part of a multilayer and multicultural process of learning. Such education should refer not only to environmental matters, but also social and economic problems. It must be provided both formally and informally. Formal education provided at schools is not sufficient for sustainable development [25]. We also need informal education, involving young people and adults, provided through mass media and various forms of individual and group self-teaching, forms of education that increasingly connected with people’s desire to always learn [26].

Nevertheless, this education, including transaction costs, is mostly funded with resources from the forest district. It is worth stressing that the costs of nature and forest education are not covered by course participants. It is free of charge and does not bear the hallmarks of purely commercial activity. The studies carried out fill the research gap of how to finance society’s educational activity.

4. Results and Discussion

A characteristic feature of the activity conducted by Poland’s PFC is that it is based on the principle of financial independence. This means that the Complexes must cover the cost of their activity from their own resources, including restricted grants from the state budget for tasks allocated by the state administration. The tasks include not only the duty to provide forest education for the society but also to build and maintain nature and forest trails, educational centers, and other elements of promotional-educational infrastructure [8]. The main educational-promotional facilities functioning in the Promotional Forest Complexes in Poland in 2012–2016 are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education center</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forest education room</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>108</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forest canopy (green class)</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>476</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forest education spot</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>476</td>
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</table>

Table 1. Educational facilities in the Promotional Forest Complexes (PFCs) in Poland.

Source: own study based on data from reports on educational activities of the State Forests National Forest Holding.

Table 1 shows that the educational infrastructure of PFCs in 2012–2016 generally increased, which may point to the social demand for this type of education, the value of the knowledge it provides, and the sense in maintaining such facilities. For instance, the number of forest education centers increased from 25 in 2012 to 34 in 2016; the number of educational trails went up from 204 to 229, and forest education points increased from 345 to 541. Forest education points are a marked object associated with forest management and are simultaneously used in forest education. The analysis of the available data indicates that the largest increase occurred in the case of conservative and seed stand (from 122 to 218) and small retention facilities (from 81 to 146).

The steady increase in the number of educational facilities in PFCs is closely related to the cost of their activity and funding sources. The data presented in Table 2 shows that in 2012–2016, the State Forests’ total expenditure on educational activity amounted to 35.5 mln EUR, including 14.8 mln EUR
on nature and forest education provided by the Promotional Forest Complexes, which made up 41.67\% of the whole sum allocated to this particular activity by the State Forests.

Table 2. The sources of funding nature and forest education in Poland, 2012–2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of Funding</th>
<th>State Forests</th>
<th>Promotional Forest Complexes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total, total in thousands of euro</td>
<td>151,139.6 (100.00%)</td>
<td>62,979.4 (41.67%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forest districts’ own resources</td>
<td>86.27%</td>
<td>80.65%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forest Fund</td>
<td>4.32%</td>
<td>11.05%</td>
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<tr>
<td>State Budget</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Fund of Environmental Protection and Water Management (NFOŚiGW)</td>
<td>0.62%</td>
<td>0.61%</td>
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<td>Provinicial Fund of Environmental Protection and Water Management (WFOŚiGW)</td>
<td>4.86%</td>
<td>3.75%</td>
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<td>Other sources</td>
<td>3.92%</td>
<td>3.94%</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
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Source: own study based on data from reports on educational activities of the State Forests National Forest Holding.

The forest districts’ own resources played the most important role in financing educational activities, both in terms of the services provided by the State Forests (86.27\%) and the Promotional Forest Complexes (80.65\%). Another major source of funding for nature and forest education was the Provincial Fund of Environmental Protection and Water Management, who provided 4.84\% of the total amount spent by the State Forests and 3.75\% of the total expenditure of the Promotional Forest Complexes.

With regard to PFC spending on nature and forest education, we observed an annual increase until 2014 (158.6 thousand EUR), followed by a clear decrease in 2015–2016 (77.1 thousand EUR in 2016) (Table 3). A detailed analysis of the funding sources for the nature and forest education provided by PFCs is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Internal and external funding sources for nature and forest education in the Promotional Forest Complexes in Poland, 2012–2016.

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<tr>
<th>Sources of Funding</th>
<th>Years</th>
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Source: own study based on data from reports on educational activities of the State Forests National Forest Holding.
The analysis of the data concerning the internal and external financial resources dedicated to nature and forest education in PFCs, showed that the largest sum had been allocated in 2014 (3.5 mln EUR). Regrettably, in the years that followed, that amount decreased by 12.87% in 2015 and 13.17% in 2016, respectively. The decreasing tendency in the same years also concerned the PFCs’ own resources spent on education (Table 3).

The basic source of funding nature and forest education, provided by PFCs, were the forest districts’ own financial resources. The total sum of these funds over the period in question came to ca. 11.9 EUR, which made up 80.61% of all own resources used for education funding. In the first three years, we observed a systematic increase in the forest districts’ spending on educational activities. In 2015, their support clearly decreased (by 12.28%), compared to the previous year. That was compensated by the money received from the Forest Fund, which increased from about 505 thousand EUR in 2014 to 538 thousand EUR in 2015, respectively (Table 3).

The data presented in Table 3 shows that in the period in question, the Forest Fund was an important source of internal funding for the nature and forest education run by the PFCs. It provided about 1.6 mln EUR, which was 11.09% of all PFC’s own resources for education. Overall, PFCs’ internal means spent on nature and forest education made up 91.7% of the total expenditure.

It is also worth pointing out that the percentage of the total expenditure using internal resources for education showed an increasing tendency, going up from 86.91% in 2014 to 94.81% in 2016. The trend was also confirmed by the mean total expenditure per one forest district: in 2012, it was 29.0 thousand EUR; in 2016 it was 35.5 thousand EUR (Table 3).

The analysis of the external educational services funding sources shows that they were most substantially supported by the Provincial Funds of Environmental Protection and Water Management (WFOŚiGW), providing over 555 thousand EUR (3.75%). Other major external sources provided over 582 thousand EUR (3.93%) (Table 3). However, from 2013 to 2016, the expenditure on nature and forest education coming from the WFOŚiGW gradually decreased from 4.78% in 2013 to 2.5% in 2016, respectively. The contribution by the National Fund of Environmental Protection and Water Management (NFOŚiGW) also decreased from 2.7% in 2012 to 0.0% in 2016, respectively. As regards the total of external funding, the share of the WFOŚiGW and the remaining sources in individual years varied and ranged from 36.5% to ca. 61% in the case of the WFOŚiGW and 34–58% in the case of the remaining sources. It is also worth mentioning that PFCs did not receive support for their educational activity from the state budget or (in some years) from the NFOŚiGW.

According to the study, the amount of financial resources received from the NFOŚiGW was rather insignificant. The State Forests were allocated 219.3 thousand EUR, only 90.3 thousand EUR of which was redirected to PFCs (Table 3). The State Forests obtained funds from this source every year, while the total amount redirected to the PFCs fluctuated and was rather modest and tended to decrease. The lack of stable financing with funds dedicated to environmental protection resulted in PFCs looking for alternative external sources to cover the cost of their educational activity.

In summary, the expenditure on nature and forest education provided by the Promotional Forest Complexes grew between 2012 to 2016, particularly with regard to the forest districts’ internal resources and the means provided by external sources. Thus, it can be expected that the small diversification of the funding sources and the predominance of the forest districts’ own resources may result in difficulties in completing educational tasks in the future. This may also occur if the financial situation of the State Forests gets worse. Financial means provided from the state budget, which are guaranteed by the law, might prevent such a situation [8]. This would occur when allocating restricted grants for tasks assigned by the government.

According to current law, the State Forests’ activity is based on the principle of financial independence, in which the costs must be covered from an institution’s own resources [8]. However, State Forests receive a restricted grant from the state budget for the educational tasks assigned by the government: organizing and providing forest education and building nature and forest trails along PFCs.
As shown by the study, however, the nature and forest education provided by the PFCs was not financed from the state budget during 2012 to 2016.

The problem is becoming a significant one. In recent years, the transaction costs of nature and forest education have increased, due to Polish society’s growing interest in and demand for this form of education. Once again, it should be stressed that this education is provided free of charge. During this time, about 4,200,000 people took advantage of various forms of nature and forest education, which made up 40% of all participants of the education organized by the State Forests. The mean annual increase rate of the educational services users in 2012–2016 was 4.5%. In 2016, their number was the highest, increasing by 6.8% compared to the previous year. In comparison to 2012, the number of people using the educational offer of the Promotional Forest Complexes in 2016 increased by nearly 20% [27].

Including the forest districts’ spending on nature and forest education, calculated per one participant, in 2016 it amounted to 3 EUR, and 2.7 EUR in 2012. This indicates an increase in expenditure by about 10%.

The nature and forest education provided by PFCs to children and adolescents is an important form of shaping ecological awareness, as it shows the economic and social role of forests as a common good. Therefore, it requires maximizing financial and organizational efforts to ensure its continuation and development within the framework of social functions. Nature and forest education is also an important example of implementing the idea of sustainable development in practice.

Ecological education is one of the main principles regulating the rights and duties in sustainable development and is among the 27 general rules established during the 1992 United Nations Conference (Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro. This summit also added the Agenda 21 Action Program [28]. Abiding by these rules that lobby for the need for nature education requires the courage and patience to endure difficult decisions; the effects of educational activities may be visible only after some time. Moreover, financial outlays may be recouped after a long time or turn out to be irretrievable. Nature education involves raising the awareness of individuals and social groups [29]. With time, the actions mentioned above will bring expected results, i.e., shaping ecological awareness in Poland. Different studies conducted in Poland [30] on the ecological awareness of Polish people show that in the late 1990s, Polish society was at the stage of shaping ecological awareness. On the one hand, people realized how important nature protection was for human life and health. On the other hand, they did not have sufficient knowledge about it and how to draw practical conclusions from it. In addition, a significant role in raising the ecological awareness of different social groups was played by ecological organizations and associations, springing up at that time. In the first and especially second decade of the current century, we have been observing an increase in ecological behaviors among the society. Poles have started to understand the significance of the natural environments influence on human health, the economy, and overall quality of life. Through their behavior, Poles are stressing the need to protect nature and develop effective ecological education among its citizens [31].

5. Conclusions

This article examines the financial side of nature and forest education provided by the State Forests in Poland. The educational task was entrusted to PFCs, which were established within the organizational structure of the State Forests National Forest Holding. The primary task of the PFCs is to promote the social function of forests, which includes ecological education. This activity is to encourage learning, self-teaching, educating, discovering nature and developing ecological awareness in individuals. Further, this education intends to instill ethical values and moral norms in social behaviors, fortifying the notion that the forest is a source of common good. In this way, it is to contribute to implementing the sustainable development of the society, economy, and nature.

The educational activity of the State Forests in Poland involves financial aspects, such as the amount and sources of financial support. The authors point to the structure and sources of funds allocated to developing ecological education and improving the condition of the educational facilities
in 2012–2016. Systematic development of the educational infrastructure was confirmed, which points to the social demand for educational activity provided by Poland’s PFCs.

It was stressed that nature and forest education is free of charge and not subject to the rules of commercial activity. Hence, it was indicated that the main funding source for ecological educating Polish society are forest districts’ internal resources (basic units of the State Forests organizational structure). This activity is also supported (though less and less every year) from external sources, mostly the WFOŚiGW. The financial resources provided by the NFOŚiGW were fairly insignificant. It should be stressed that the function of nature and forest education was not financially supported from the state budget.

In the 21st century, the ecological education of the society is the basis of socio-economic transformations and improvement of quality of life, according to the rules of sustainable development. In this strategy, forests are a common good and must be protected and cared for. Therefore, the education of the society, including the nature and forest education provided by Poland’s PFCs may contribute to the following:

- Developing ecologic responsibility in children, adolescents, and adults with respect to protecting and improving natural, forested environments for the sake of present and future generations.
- Maintaining basic ecological processes and their systems, preserving biodiversity, and ensuring the economic and socio-medicinal use of forests.
- Equal treatment of social, economic, and ecological issues, as well as focusing on the need to integrate nature protection issues into government and local government policy.
- Protecting individual elements of the forest environment from potential threats.
- Popularizing educational activities in order to make different social groups and institutions interested in nature and forest education. Moreover, to make people aware of the need and possibilities of aiding in sustainable development problem solving.
- Promoting nature and forest education for the benefit of sustainable development among the rural and urban area inhabitants, including children, adolescents, adults, and senior citizens. Further, this includes economic entities, potential investors, tourists, and territorial authorities.

In practice, conducting this investigate was based on the rules stated in international documents of sustainable development, such as the “Rio Declaration” and “Agenda 21”.

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