

The New Forestry

Will forest managers and public policy makers bridge the gap between what science can do and what the public will accept?

There was a time, in the not too distant past, when writing about forestry was a lot like writing about motherhood and apple pie.

For better or worse, that is not the case anymore.

The widening public debate over timber harvesting on federal forest lands, particularly here in the Pacific Northwest, has changed everything.

Now it seems the spotted owl controversy was only the tip of the iceberg. Now there are other less riveting debates which lack the volatility of the spotted owl controversy, but pose an even greater threat to our region's federal timber lands.

Among these debates:

The use of herbicides to control the spread of brush which robs newly planted seedling trees of essential nutrients, sunlight and moisture. There is a public perception these herbicides, which are widely used on yards, gardens and golf courses, are somehow unsafe for use in forests.

The use of controlled burns as a means of eliminating logging slash which hampers planting crews. Urban residents, increasingly concerned about air quality, perceive that controlled burns are a major source of pollution.

The use of genetically improved seedlings, which grow faster, produce better quality wood and are more resistant to disease, frost and drought. Some people fear this sort of tinkering with nature's genetic codes will create mutant forests called monocultures.

The practice of clearcutting, which scientists tell us is one of the best methods of harvesting and regenerating Douglas fir, our region's most predominant tree species. The public isn't buying it. Nothing, they say, that looks that bad could possibly be good for the forest.

The common thread in these debates seems to center on the nebulous notion that a more holistic, more natural approach to forestry is more desirable than continued use of the aforementioned man-made tools of forestry.

We call this back-to-nature approach *the new forestry*. It is the newest surrogate in the continuing debate over the harvest of old growth timber from our region's forests.

Although *the new forestry* lacks definition, and seems to be rooted more in philosophy than science, its advocates are encouraging the public to think in terms of organic gardening on a grand scale.

What the public does not know is that most of the key elements of *the new forestry*, including a virtual ban on clear-cutting, have been in place on public forest land for some time now. The public is also largely unaware that, from a purely scientific perspective, there is nothing new about the new forestry.

From its 12th century beginnings in Europe, the science of forestry has been a natural science. While it is true that forest geneticists are now unlocking nature's deepest tree growing secrets, the fact is that everything we know about growing trees we have learned from observing, and imitating nature.

What is new about *the new forestry* is its linkage to dissimilar environmental issues. As an example, Dr. Jerry Franklin, the University of Washington forest ecologist who is the spiritual leader of *the new forestry* movement, says a key element of the strategy is "save more of the parts that make up the forest, so that what is left after logging has the best chance of surviving the radical climatic changes that a growing number of scientists predict will come within the next 50 years as the planet gets hotter."

But new computer generated climate models, which rely on more sophisticated representations of clouds and oceans, predict the planet may warm by as little as 1.6 degrees over the next century, not 5.5 degrees as earlier models predicted. As a result, researchers at the National Center for Atmospheric Research have cut their greenhouse predictions in half.

In "Not So Hot," an article about climate modeling published in the November issue of *Scientific American*, writer Tim Beardsley observed, "When editors and newscasters routinely bandy about the term 'global warming,' then the idea could be said to have entered the body of public knowledge, accepted by most as immutable fact."

In a recent editorial, *Wall Street Journal* reporter, Daniel Henninger warned of the dangers of subverting the public policy making process through fabrica-

tions of immutable fact.

"Today, much public policy, especially as practiced by many environmental advocates, is mainly about making doubters or opponents reluctant to challenge the consensus . . . What seems to work is whipping up a kind of mass media fervor behind one's ideas. The danger in this is that it may cause the public to think that science is now primarily about politics, and in politics about half the people usually think that you're not telling the truth."

When science is politicized, as forest science has been, the public is left in the dark without the answers it needs to shape new policies. As an example, two very important questions are missing from the debate surrounding the emergence of *the new forestry*.

First, will this new hands off approach to forestry invite Yellowstone-like conflagrations in old growth forests we want to preserve. Many forest ecologists are privately saying this may be the case, and have warned against leaving long-managed forests to the unpredictable ravages of nature.

Second, can *the new forestry* meet soaring consumer demand for wood and paper products, or must we turn to non-renewable building materials that are less energy efficient and more toxic in their manufacture. If changing public policies force a 50% decline in federal timber harvesting, as some have predicted, where will the nation get its wood. Will a Third World cartel become our principle source of wood fiber.

There are no easy answers to these questions, but there is clearly the need to bridge the gap between what science can do and what the public will accept.

One public opinion survey, conducted last July by Columbia Information Systems, Portland, revealed that most people living in the 11 Western states favor environmental protection of forests over economic considerations.

Among the survey's findings:

There is great concern for wildlife habitat, water quality, scenic values and recreation resources.

Many people perceive that forests are being overcut.

Most westerners are unaware that logging is not permitted in wilderness areas

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and national parks; and there is widespread unawareness of reforestation efforts underway on public and private forest land across the West.

In spite of these concerns, 69% of all survey respondents said they would be more likely to support existing harvest levels if they knew that several trees were replanted for every tree harvested. Even those who believe timber harvest levels should be reduced said they might be persuaded to reverse their position with the assurance that adequate numbers of trees would be available in the future.

What remains unclear is what level of management activity the public will accept to ensure a balance between environmental concern and economic necessity.

Perhaps 40% of the nation's wood fiber now comes from federal forest lands. Private lands, heavily harvested in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, won't be ready for harvest again for another 25 years.

What's more, the Forest Service predicts consumer demand for wood products will increase by 50% over the next 50 years. Although the nation is currently a net exporter of manufactured wood products, we also import 30% of our lumber, principally from Canada.

Several high ranking Forest Service officials have said privately that there is a good deal of national forest land here in the Pacific Northwest capable of producing *twice as much* wood fiber as it currently produces. But to do this, a much more intensive harvest and reforestation regimen would have to be in place, and that is something proponents of *the new forestry* will not tolerate.

The new forestry holds that intensive forest management, which places heavy emphasis on growing and harvesting trees, adversely impacts forest ecosystems. *The new forestry* also holds that lightning-caused fires and insect infestations, which occur naturally in ecosystems, are good for the forest.

These contradictory concepts are very hard for me to reconcile, particularly when weighed against the fact that natural occurrences destroy more wood fiber annually than the nation consumes. Moreover, lightning-caused fires and insect infestations now pose a significant threat to the nation's wilderness areas and national parks, where federal law prohibits fire suppression and insect and disease control.

This is not to say *the new forestry* has no redeeming value. Indeed, its greatest value may lie in forcing an intelligent, discussion of the public's forest management options, for there are clearly many more scientifically based options than *new forestry* philosophers would have us believe.

As this discussion proceeds, the scien-

tific community is going to have to assume some responsibility for policing advocates of *the new forestry*. The advocates should not, for example, be allowed to wax philosophically about the ecological dangers of "old growth fragmentation" without first acknowledging the fact that nature regularly fragments forests on a grand scale using the only tools she has: wildfire, wind and disease.

Former Washington Governor Dixie Lee Ray, who chaired the Atomic Energy Commission for several years, talked about responsibility among scientists in a 1988 speech.

"It is up to good scientists to weed those phonies out," she declared. "But we don't do it. Rather, we allow, by our silence, such renegade organizations as the Union of Concerned Scientists to present itself as the voice of the scientific community. They back up the Helen Caldicotts, Barry Commoners, Paul Ehrlichs, Amory Lovinses and other pretenders. While the respected scientific community judges very strictly those at the top of their profession, they simply ignore the incompetents and no-goods at the bottom."

Dr. Ray also urged scientists and the news media to learn to work together to ensure the public is well informed.

"There is simply no other mechanism that can provide the necessary scientific information to society for social decision making," she declared. "The public will remain uninformed and uneducated in science until the media professionals decide otherwise, until they stop quoting charlatans and quacks, and until respected scientists speak up."

The gap between what science can do and what the public will accept will not be closed until the public is confident that what our scientists are saying, and what our land managers are doing on federal land, is working.

There are, at present, some people trumpeting *the new forestry* with such ferocity that a largely uninformed public is left to conclude that forestry today is not different than it was 25 years ago.

Clearly, forest products industry, and public forest land managers, are going to have to spend a lot more time discussing forestry's advancements and forest management options with the news media and public. The plain fact is that the gap between what science can do, and what the public will accept, will not be closed until the public is confident that what our scientists are saying and what our land managers are doing on federal forest lands is working.

To restore public confidence in forestry, it may be necessary for Congress

to create a new, top level scientific forum, fashioned in the image of the Grace commission, which analyzed waste in government. This new forum should be charged with responsibility of separating fact from fiction as it concerns management practices on public forest lands.

Congress must also reassert itself in the public policy making arena. In his thoughtful new book, *Judicial Compulsions: How Public Law Distorts Public Policy*, Cornell University law professor, Jeremy Rabkin, takes us into the entangled world of judicial activists, partisan judges, federal regulators and litigious special interest groups.

In his *Wall Street Journal* review of Rabkin's book, legal scholar, Robert Bork, said, "Mr. Rabkin demonstrates that in this area courts have, largely unthinkingly, and with considerable assistance from Congress, perverted the concept of rights. These were once thought to be something the individual possessed and could defend in court, but the individual had to show an injury to himself. Over the last two decades, it has come to be thought that individuals can go to court to assert their own parochial views of the public's legal rights . . . Modern administrative law . . . allows private lawsuits to control agencies' enforcement discretion. This necessarily shifts important segments of policy making from those politically accountable to private persons and courts."

Until public confidence in forestry is restored, we would do well to heed a couple of political facts of life offered in 1910 by Gifford Pinchot, first chief of the

U. S. Forest Service.

Public support for acts affecting public rights is absolutely required.

Find out in advance what the public will stand for. If it is right and they won't stand for it, postpone action and educate them.

We would also do well to heed Pinchot's warning about the dangers of succumbing to wishy washy philosophical discussions when tough forestry issues are called into question.

He who disdains management in favor of no management is like the farmer who refuses to cultivate his farm on the grounds that he distrusted his own fitness and integrity.

—Greg Miller