

New Forestry and the Debate

This essay was prepared by Logan Norris, head of the Department of Forest Science, Oregon State University, in reaction to Bill Atkinson's presentation to the Oregon Society of American Foresters in Eugene in May 1990 (excerpts published in the summer 1990 Western Banner) and the Jerry Franklin/Bill Atkinson debates during the new forestry tours sponsored by the Western Forestry and Conservation Association this summer and fall. While these events triggered the essay, Logan emphasizes the message is directed to the forestry profession.

The debate about new forestry is not only polarizing our profession, but eroding the public's confidence in our profession as well. The polarization occurs in part from failure to understand what new forestry is and how it fits in with the changing values of our society, and in part from the manner in which foresters debate. This debate is reducing the public's confidence, which is already low, because it appears that a significant segment of our profession is unwilling to seriously consider the new approaches wanted by society. Debating is not the culprit, but rather, how foresters are doing it! The tendency toward confrontation and either-or solutions is destructive and must stop.

What is new forestry?

In contrast to most forestry terms, there is not a commonly accepted definition of new forestry. In fact, it isn't any one thing. I see it as the adaptation of forest management to embody

newer concepts from ecological research which are believed, but not yet validated, to provide a different mix of values from forests, and will maintain a broader array of future options. New forestry manages collections of stands across landscapes and deals with them in aggregate over time. It gives more attention to how these stands relate to one another and how these relationships might change with time. The purpose of new forestry is to attain the more complex array of management objectives that society wants.

Society's values are changing

Many foresters have felt that "good" timber management is good for-everything-else management. The problem is that good does not tell much about the level of value assigned to the various goods, services and characteristics which are part of the forest. For instance, if society's level of value for non-commodities is not very high, then it doesn't take much to make the statement true.

Forty years ago most of society

did not place the same level of value on non-commodities as today. There was a lot of seemingly undisturbed forest, and society was busy tackling other issues such as worldwide economic depression, world war, cold war and acquisition of affluence or creating "a better life for our kids." Today's society is relatively affluent, well educated and politically astute. The forest patterns they see represent a loss of a forest heritage which they value highly.

Society is becoming increasingly aware that nature works as a whole rather than in pieces, and it assigns a higher level of value to the forest, not just the trees which are part of the forest. More attention is desired for aesthetics, recreation, wildlife and the like. So, management objectives, on public lands at least, must result in a different emphasis in the mix of values. Of course, society wants wood products as well, but these new broader societal goals may not be as compatible with good timber management as the old ones. Thus, the challenge is to

and new ways to manage that achieve the specific set of objectives adopted for a particular landscape. New forestry is an attempt to meet this challenge.

The debate

Foresters are debating the tools — new forestry versus old forestry — but these tools are surrogates for the objectives of management, about which society disagrees. Let's grow trees, lots of them, and real fast. Or, let's save the ancient forest or the last or largest remaining stand of ... for the sake of biodiversity and our souls. These very different objectives of management are legitimate and appropriate, but obviously not for the same areas.

The reality is that society needs and wants both. Insisting that foresters maintain current emphasis on timber values ignores the obvious demands of a society with changing values. Argue all you want that society doesn't understand. The fact is, society demands change. Equally, arguing for the abandonment of active timber management across much of the forest landscape ignores the obvious demands of society for forest products, economic and social stability, and the comforts of our consumer-oriented lifestyles. Neither extreme is responsible forestry for today's society. Society probably doesn't understand that the forest is a finite resource, and all uses can't be fully satisfied. The challenge of the forestry profession is to help society select an optimum mix of values that in turn can become the objectives of management.

What approach is best? A professionally responsible approach identifies and discloses to landowners a diversity of possible objectives, and the various methods for their attainment, with analysis of trade-offs. There are multiple owners of every forest. Public landownership is obvious; however, the public also has some level of ownership of private lands, as evidenced by the laws

which regulate practices on private lands.

Debate is important, but it must be thoughtfully done. How else can foresters exchange perspectives and evaluate positions which may be different from our own?

The bottom line

Let's move *this* debate to a higher plane. All foresters have said and believed in the concept of "the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run," somehow

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thinking what was accepted as good was reasonably constant over time. But that was naive. The forest management strategies of 1900 were accepted as appropriate to the needs of society of the day, but the needs of the 1990s society are quite different. Today, the greatest number is saying that what constitutes good is different. Society expects foresters to adjust their management techniques to meet the objectives society now expects for forest lands.

New forestry in its present form is one approach to this end. I have no patience with those arguing "it hasn't been tested so it shouldn't be used." Forestry at this scale cannot be tested by plot-level experimentation. Use is the test, and the politics of the day dictate it will be widely tested.

Successful testing requires close alliances between the research and

management communities along with substantive public involvement. However, key elements of testing are missing, specifically, (a) clear articulation of objectives to be attained; (b) establishment of methods and infrastructure for data collection, analysis and interpretation; and (c) evidence of commitment to adjustment of practices based on the results from the test. The mechanisms for development of research, management and public alliances are poorly developed, except in a few areas.

What's the answer?

Today's new forestry probably isn't the best or the final answer. I expect science and management will have to devise and test strategies which will make new forestry look tame by comparison! So be ready, and participate responsibly in this important period of change — perhaps the biggest change in forestry of this century!

One final point I'd like to make is that forest policy which will last for the long pull must be biologically sound, make sense economically, and be socially and politically acceptable. Failure to achieve any of these will result in failure of the policy. Many in our profession seem to be saying what the policy should be. It is my firm conviction that this is the sole responsibility of the owners, or the public. Of course, foresters are also owners, and very knowledgeable ones at that, so we must be active in the policy arena. Speak as citizens or speak as professionals and participate in the debate — just be sure it is obvious which hat you are wearing.

It is not our job as professionals to select the objectives of management, only to suggest and accurately display and explain the alternatives and to carry out the mandates of the owners. Failure to do so will result in continued discrediting of the forestry profession, and the increased practicing of forestry by other than professional foresters.