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Eugene Register-Guard

# Old growth forest site renowned in research

■ **Ecology:** After 50 years, the H.J. Andrews forest remains a top study habitat.

By LANCE ROBERTSON  
The Register-Guard

BLUE RIVER — Strapped into a harness and wearing a small helmet, Steve Sillett hooks himself to a rope and scampers up a huge Douglas fir to his "world above."

For most of the 1990s, Sillett has worked in the treetops high above the ground in the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest east of Blue River, studying things such as epiphytes, Loblaria and bryophytes.

Those would be lichens and mosses to the rest of us.

Sillett, who earned a doctorate from Oregon State University and who now is a professor at Humboldt State University, is carrying on a tradition of pioneering research at the experimental forest, one of the world's premier ecological research sites.

"This place has been a hub of research for a long, long time," Sillett said.

The H.J. Andrews forest is celebrating its 50th anniversary and drew apostles of old growth ecosystems along with about 250 others last Friday for a day of speeches, workshops and reminiscing.

Created in 1948 and named for a former U.S. Forest Service regional forester, the 16,000-acre Andrews has served as the scientific ground-zero in the long-running debate over the nation's remaining old growth forests.

Beginning in the 1970s, scientists working in the Andrews forest did the first-ever studies of old growth ecosystems. They were the first to study the northern spotted owl and what makes these ecosystems tick. They pioneered research into the importance of wood that falls into streams. They built the world's largest "debris flow" flume to study landslides. They launched a 200-year study of how logs rot.

The knowledge that flowed out of the H.J. Andrews research about old growth forests caused major changes in how the Northwest's federal timberlands are managed. In 1994, President Clinton curtailed federal logging by 80 percent and put most of the remaining old growth off limits to further harvesting.

"We came along with a lot of knowledge about old growth ecosystems at a very critical time," said Jerry Franklin, a University of Washington professor who is regarded as the "guru" of old growth forestry.

Franklin, who was the Forest Service's senior ecologist at the time, was the author of numerous research papers, including one

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## FOREST

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called PNW-447.

That publication defined an old growth forest and helped launch one of the biggest changes in federal forest management this century.

Even in the early years, research on timber harvesting and reforestation at H.J. Andrews helped shape forestry practices.

In the 1960s, major studies of watersheds looked at how logging affects water quality. A study that began after the 1964 floods provided important historical information for scientists who, 22 years later, documented the impact of the 1996 floods.

In the last 10 years alone, more than 700 articles and papers have been published based on research done at the experimental forest. It is one of the National Science Foundation's 22 long-term ecological research sites.

"It is one of the crown jewels," said Fred Stormer, deputy director of the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station in Corvallis.

It originally was called the Blue River Experimental Forest but was renamed in 1953 when Horace "Hoss" Andrews was killed in a car wreck. It is jointly run by OSU and the Forest Service, with considerable financial support from the National Science Foundation.

Until the 1980s, however, there were virtually no permanent buildings in the site. Scientists lived in trailers in Blue River and later, in old war-surplus barracks and trailers hauled to the site.

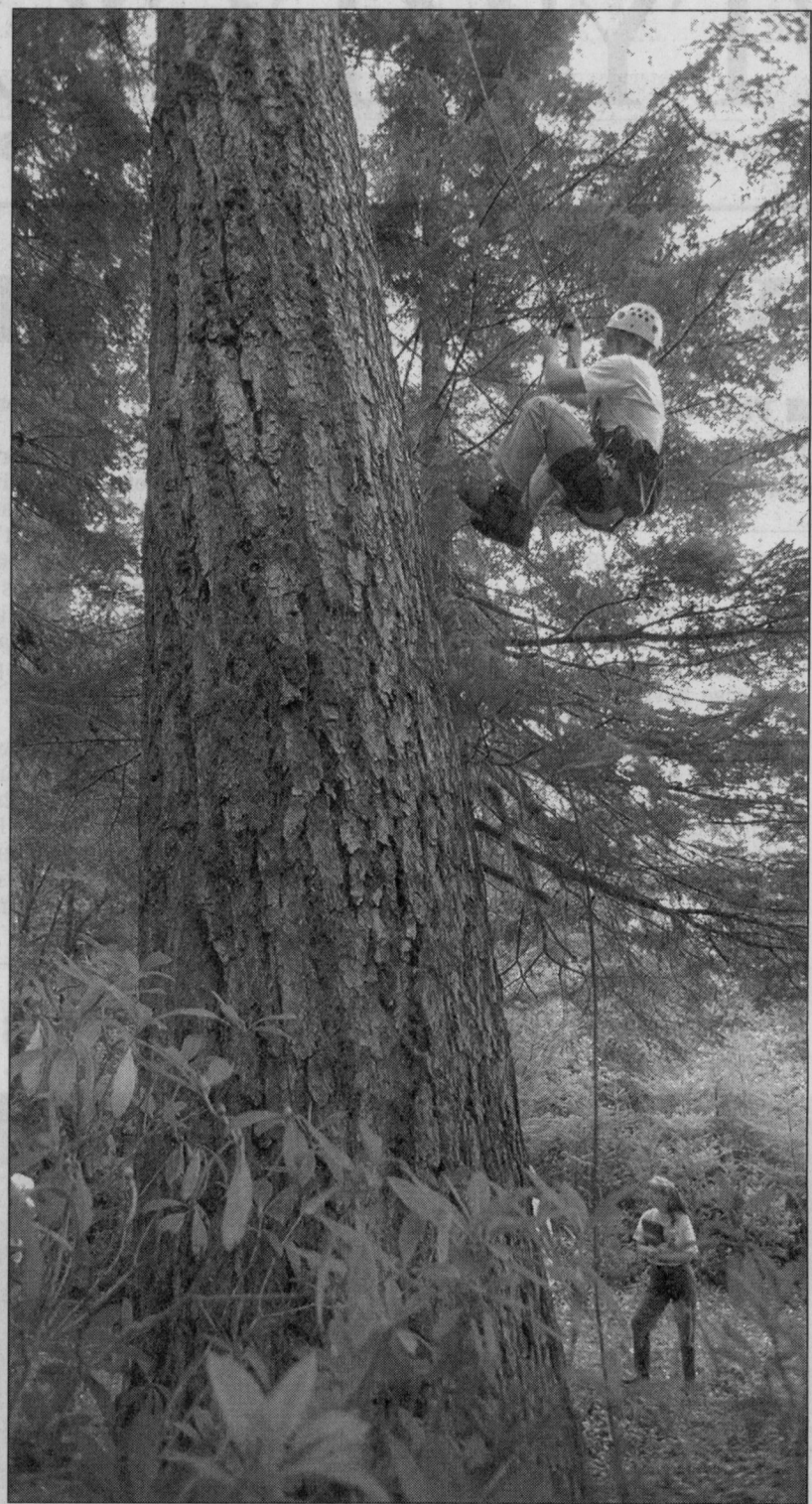
Living conditions were so bad that scientists called the headquarters area the "ghetto in the meadow." One time, a bathtub fell through the rotted-out floor of a trailer — while a researcher was in it.

Franklin, who started working at the Andrews forest in 1957 while he was a student, said the forest was on the verge of closing down in the late 1960s because forest managers decided they "knew everything" about how to harvest trees.

Interest in studying old growth forests was low, but Franklin and some other scientists won out in the late 1960s in efforts to launch some studies of the native forests.

"That was the turning point," Franklin said. Up until then, "we knew nothing about old growth forests, except to cut them."

He said he had spent more than 20 years in forests without noticing



CHRIS PIETSCH / The Register-Guard

Forest researcher and professor Steve Sillett (climbing) is studying lichens and mosses at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest.

one of their most significant components: the dead, dying logs that were scattered around on the ground.

"It never occurred to me that these big structures had important ecological value," he said.

That makes Franklin wonder about the H.J. Andrews forest's next 50 years. If the most renowned old growth scientists couldn't see the logs for the trees, "what aren't we seeing today that will be important in the future?"

## WATER

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