

FORESTS FOR WHOM AND FOR WHAT?

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1.

Why Concern Ourselves with Forest Policy?

Forests serve the American people in many ways and have the potential to serve more people in better and more generous ways. Everyone uses wood in some form—in such simple household uses as facial tissue, toilet paper, newspapers, and wrapping materials; as paper in various forms in offices and stores; as furniture; and as an essential component of all new construction for homes, offices, factories, and stores. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of anyone who does not use wood in some form. He would have to live in a cave, use stone furniture, burn coal picked off the surface of the land, and have found some nonwood substitute for toilet paper. Much of the water used in homes, in factories, for miscellaneous urban purposes, and for irrigation flows from watersheds that are largely or wholly forested. At least half, and perhaps considerably more, of the total population engages in outdoor recreation on both public and privately owned land, much of which is forested, and forests, particularly their edges where they meet open land, are the home for a rich and varied wildlife. In all these ways, and others that are less obvious or affect smaller numbers of people, forests of one kind or another affect all people—some, of course, more than others, and in different ways, but no one in the United States today is wholly independent of forests.

The importance of forests in the total natural resource scene can be measured in several ways. Forests are a major land use; they occupy 33 percent of the total land area of the country—754 million acres today in all fifty states. Two-thirds of this, 500 million acres, is occupied by “commercial” forests and the remainder by forests reserved from harvest, such as those in national parks and those of too low productivity for economic wood production.¹ Only the grazing

¹ Some activities use forest (and other) land but not the forest (trees); for instance, roads, transmission lines, mining, grazing, and even second home development where the use of trees is similar to that on suburban lots. These land uses are not considered in this book.

of domestic livestock on nonforested natural range lands uses about as much land in the United States as does forests; all other kinds of land use are concentrated on much smaller areas. It must be pointed out that the very much smaller area of land used for residential, commercial, and other urban purposes has a much higher value (not including buildings and other improvements) than does forest land. But forests are major land occupiers by whatever precise measure one cares to use.

Forests are important in many other ways as well. Approximately 70,000 persons are employed directly in forests and another million or more in forest processing industries. About 5 percent of the gross national product arises from the use of forest products, which, in economic planning and management have assumed an unusual importance in the past half dozen or so years. Prices of forest products have fluctuated widely because of a high level of housing production, stimulated in part by government programs; because of a high level of export demand for logs and other forest products; and because of restrictions in timber supply, in part resulting from stricter environmental protection measures. Twice since 1968 the price of stumpage (the standing tree in the forest), the price of harvested logs, and the price of finished and semifinished products, such as lumber, have mounted rapidly to levels previously unknown and then have quickly receded, at least part way, to former levels. Lumber and other wood products contribute 2.65 percent to the weighting in the general wholesale price index. When lumber prices have doubled in a year, as they have twice in recent inflationary periods, the direct effect is to pull the whole price index upward by 2.65 percent; the secondary effect may be equally great, as other prices are adjusted to a higher level and as wages are readjusted by a cost-of-living formula. Thus, unusual attention has focused on price movements of lumber and other forest products, especially in periods of rapidly rising prices—when lumber prices fall, the public seems to pay much less attention.

The services and products provided by the forests not only have value and importance to the American public, but it would not be easy to find substitute sources of services or materials if forest areas or supplies were somehow cut off or reduced. Outdoor recreation is possible in many situations other than forests, yet a forest—or at least a number of trees—is a highly valuable asset for any outdoor recreation area. Forests are often a valuable feature of the wilderness scene. Many watersheds are not forested, yet forests cover much of the more valuable watershed areas of the country. Other building materials exist which in some circumstances can be economically

used, but wood has the great advantage of being renewable—it grows rather than being exhaustible as is iron ore, bauxite, or other aluminum sources, and the various fuels needed to process the metals.² Transformation of wood from standing tree to final construction material requires vastly less energy than does the comparable transformation of ore to construction metal or of limestone to cement. As a result, the environmental impact of producing wood is generally far less than the environmental impact of producing any substitute building material. In addition, wood is biodegradable in a way that metals are not. Wood can be disposed of more easily and more quickly than other building materials when it is no longer usable in its original or primary purpose. As the nation becomes more conservation-minded, the potentialities of wood loom larger.

FOREST POLICY HAS LONG BEEN A NATIONAL CONCERN

The United States has long had national programs of one kind or another concerned with forests. The establishment of the “forest reserves”—now called national forests—began in 1891. Their administration has been the subject of much legislation and debate in the intervening years, and continues so today. There is a substantial cooperative program of fire prevention and control for forests of all ownerships, financed in part by the federal government and in large part by the states and private landowners. A similar program is available for insect and disease control. There are also research programs on various aspects of forestry; these are largely federal, but some are also sponsored by other levels of government. There are extensive programs of direct aid to private forest owners—technical assistance, seedlings for planting, and the like. There have been limitations on exports of logs harvested from federal lands, and there have been proposals to limit total wood export. All of these and other public programs affect forests and forest owners directly.

In addition, there are many public programs which indirectly affect forestry to a significant extent. Transportation, taxation, housing, foreign trade, monetary, and other public programs have often had a major effect on forest output and on utilization of forest goods and services. Educational and research programs have also had substantial, though indirect, effect.

² For a somewhat detailed discussion of this subject, with quantitative data and with sources, see Jerome Saeman, “Solving Resource and Environmental Problems by the More Efficient Utilization of Timber,” *Report of the President's Advisory Panel on Timber and the Environment*, Appendix K (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1973).

CONTROVERSIES OVER FOREST POLICY

The past decade or so has seen the initiation or the expansion of several controversies about forests in the United States. These controversies have been more concerned with public than with privately owned forests, yet the latter have not escaped entirely. Some of the controversy has found expression in attempts to obtain or to prevent legislation, especially federal legislation. As such, it often takes place in Congressional committee hearings or through efforts to influence individual Congressmen. But some of the controversy has taken place within or been directed toward the Executive Branch—the effort to get or to oppose an Executive Order, for instance. These are traditional ways of trying to influence governmental action for the benefit of some interest group, usually at the expense of other groups or of the general public; they are not limited to forestry matters, or to natural resource issues, but extend to all governmental activities.

A new feature in the formulation of public policy—in practice, operative largely for various natural resource issues—has been the use of the court suit, especially one brought by groups of interested citizens. The building of a road into a roadless area is stopped by injunction of a court of appropriate jurisdiction, or a timber sale is stopped in the same way, or the construction of a pipeline to carry oil across public lands is similarly opposed. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 not only expressed national concern over the environment, but its requirement for environmental impact statements for “major” federal projects or actions required federal agencies to direct more attention to environmental problems than they had done in the past, and at the same time gave the citizen interest groups a more convenient procedure for opposing actions with which they disagreed. Many of the suits have charged that the federal agency involved did not adequately comply with this provision of the Act.

At the same time, the courts of the nation have been both taking a greater interest in environmental matters and relaxing the conditions under which citizen groups may sue. At an earlier date, intervention in the courts was limited to those who could show a direct, personal, economic interest in the proposed public action. Today, “standing to sue” has been greatly widened—just how much, perhaps only future court actions will define precisely. The balance of power between the “conservationist” citizen group and industry has shifted dramatically and suddenly toward the former, at least for the

present. Only a hardy prophet would deny the possibility of some future reverse shift in power.

Many thoughtful observers of natural resource use and management doubt that adversary proceedings before a court are the most efficient way to formulate national or social policy. Such proceedings often ignore or neglect the interests of groups that are not parties to the legal controversy. The courts and the antagonists often are unable to explore possible solutions, such as new management programs, new investments and the like, which might give each party to the controversy a large part, but perhaps not all, of what each sought. The gains by one party need not be exactly and precisely at the expense of other parties; there may be better solutions than this.

The forest policy issues discussed in this book are believed to be particularly timely for the 1973 to 1975 period, but they did not arise in these years for the first time; many of them have been around for a relatively long time. Nor are they likely all to be ended soon—some are hardy perennials. Some of the specific issues will require the attention of the Ford Administration and will be fought before the 93rd and 94th Congresses; but some will engage the attention of the President elected in 1976, whoever he may be and from whichever party he may come, and of the 95th and 96th and successive Congresses. Most forest policy issues have not been partisan political party issues; more typically, there have been diverse interests within each party. On many of the issues, a Congressman will be subjected to divergent interests and pressures from within his district. Still further, many of the issues are not exclusively issues for public action; private actions and decisions may be highly important for some.