

Restoration Surgery

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The post-card sized broadside from Greenpeace slid under the hotel door at 4 a.m. “Sorry we couldn’t be with you in Arkansas this week,” the italic-script reads, “but we are busy addressing the threats to our public lands at our first U.S. Global Forest Rescue Station in Oregon.” All conferees at the U.S. Forest Service-organized Healthy Forest Conference, held in Little Rock in early June 2004, and focused on the Bush Administration’s Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA), received this small wake-up call from the environmental activist organization: “While you gather in Arkansas, we are gathering in Oregon to educate people about real threats to our public lands like – [HFRA].”

This dark-of-night challenge had had its open-air component: the day before a small knot of protesters had gathered before the Statehouse Convention Center, toting signs that read: “Forest Health, Not Timber Wealth,” a catchy slogan that Glen Hooks, regional conservation coordinator for the Sierra Club, embellished upon. What the Forest Service “will not admit is that the Bush administration policies seek to increase logging at the expense of taxpayer dollars and are contrary to citizens’ desires,” he told the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*. “What they will not admit is that the Bush administration forest policies favor healthy profits for the timber industry over truly healthy profits.”¹

Within the quiet convention space, the rhetoric was every bit as politicized. Weighing the difference

between those on the inside and on the outside, I heard one attendee blurt out: “we believe in good science; they believe in bad management.” More measured were the words of Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, dismissed those doubting the wisdom of the forest restoration act, asserting: the “strong, bipartisan support for Healthy Forest legislation sent a signal that people are tired of fighting old battles, that they are ready to work together for forest health as a common long-term goal.” That sea-change in public attitude was why Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee believed that the healthy forest initiative would emerge as one of the administration’s most significant actions, a sterling legacy for the nation. Bush is, Veneman trumpeted, our “conservationist in chief.”²

HFRA may neither be as important as its supporters believe or as benighted as its detractors allege. So few of its mandates are fully funded—a point of considerable discussion in corridor conversations during the two-day conference—that its ultimate, on-the-ground impact may be more muted than malevolent. As demonstrated in the much-ballyhooed, but cash-poor No Child Left Behind education legislation that the Bush administration passed in 2001, and in the almost budget-less Environmental Protection Agency that President Nixon launched in 1970, Washington budgetary politics is often something of a shell game.

There is this con, too, embedded in HFRA. One of its key provisions, Title 5, encourages partnerships

between federal, state, and local entities, NGOs, tribal groups, and non-industrial landowners. Like its official title, “Partnering for Healthy Forests,” the conference unabashedly spotlighted some of these successful ventures. Virtually every one of the breakout sessions was framed around the cooperative ethos, from turkey-habitat restoration initiatives in South Carolina to nation-wide, interagency partnerships for fire management; from tribal watershed-protection projects to the rehabilitation of longleaf-pine ecosystems. Yet the majority of case studies pre-dated the HFRA, some by many years. That’s consistent with the agency’s past: Even before there was a Forest Service, its progenitor, the Division of Forestry, announced through Circular 21 (1898) that it would aid private landowners in developing forest management plans for small woodlots or vast holdings, a crucial first step in establishing its now, more-than-century-long collaborative tradition. In this important respect, HFRA breaks no new ground.

Its success in partnership development will depend as well on an older ecological imperative, one Aldo Leopold brought to our attention in the mid-twentieth century. In *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), he challenged us to “think like a mountain,” a challenge that was designed to get us out of our skins, if only momentarily. Such an out-of-body experience would give us an opportunity to imagine the dense set of biotic interactions that make up any niche we might seek to restore; symptomatic of this heightened consciousness was his



family's efforts to regenerate their worn-out farm in Wisconsin. Skeptical that governmental agencies were capable of initiating, promoting, and monitoring land restoration, he was more certain that individual initiative and grassroots efforts had a better chance of success, a conviction as much born of his family's restoration of The Shack as of his disdain for big New Deal reclamation projects.

His wariness had (and has) its place. There were, however, hopeful signs at Little Rock that in small ways governmental agencies were getting what Leopold believed was the bigger picture. At some point during each presentation, the speaker would flash on the screen a PowerPoint page emblazoned with the agency seals and organizational icons of the broader partnership. Taken together, these heraldic emblems reflect the creation of the complex human ecology so necessary to the creation of a deeper understanding of the complicated environments these coalitions hope to repair and regenerate.

Most impressive in this regard is the woodland ecosystem restoration project in the Arkansas Highlands, and sited in the Bayou Ranger District of the Ozark National Forest. Determining how to restore a landscape requires knowing which past you want to recreate, and the Forest Service and its many partners concluded that the historic forest struc-

ture best adapted to the mountainous country was that which the first white settlers encountered when they pushed into the region in the early nineteenth century. The "park-like, oak-hickory and pine woodlands with a rich mix of wild flowers and grasses" was the result of several millennia of Native American-set fires, a regime that European settlers mimicked until the post-Civil War era. Then the forests were heavily logged, and a policy of fire suppression enacted on state and federal lands, such that what had been once a relatively open woodland, with an estimated 45-75 trees per acre, had become a tangle sustaining upwards of 1,000 trees per acre. Its density is but one marker of the upland forest's precarious condition—an estimated 300,000 acres of it are insect infested, and much of the larger stand is further weakened by drought and quite vulnerable to fire.

Restoration started small—a series of demonstration plots were thinned, burned, and closely monitored, activities that tested the hypothetical capacity to recreate historic forest cover and, not incidentally, evaluated the partnership that underwrote these initial steps. Emboldened by early signs of progress, the Forest Service, in combination with the Nature Conservancy, National Park Service, and Fish & Wildlife Service; the Arkansas Game & Fish, Forestry, and Natural Heritage Commissions; Quails Unlimited, National Wild Turkey

Federation, and the Southwest Fire Use Training Academy, have targeted an additional 60,000 acres for rehabilitation.

How judge its proponents' upbeat assessment of their chances for success? Leopold, once more, provides a measuring stick: "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." We will better able to judge outcomes in the Ozark Highlands if quail, elk, and turkey once more roam the open-canopy woodlands; if its fires are less catastrophic; and if a healthy ecosystem, and an equally salubrious human community, emerge. But to achieve such a tantalizing future, as Leopold knew well, requires something more profound than "letterhead pieties and convention oratory."³

NOTES

1. Kim McGuire, "Plans aim to cut wildfire threat," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, June 8, 2004, p. 1B, 4B.
2. *Ibid*; "Remarks of Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman at the Healthy Forest Conference...June 7, 2004," USDA release No. 0229.04.
3. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 207, 224.

