

Taking the Long View: Conservation Investments for Future Generations

Mike Dombeck

THE END OF A TRANSITION

Over the past decade or longer, the Forest Service has been characterized as caught in a seemingly endless transition from development and production to conservation and stewardship. Between 1960 and 1989, timber harvests on national forests remained between 9 and 12 billion board feet per year. Since then, harvests have declined by about 70 percent to about 3 billion board feet per year.

With the recent announcement of our roads and roadless policies, I think it is time to recognize that the period of transition is over. The roads rule's emphasis away from new road construction toward providing safe and efficient public access in a fiscally responsible and environmentally sensitive manner is emblematic. Similarly, completion of the roadless rule signifies the shift away from the timber controversies of the past decade over roadless entry and old-growth harvest.

Change is never easy. Just two years ago, threats of diminished agency funding to a "custodial level" were rampant. This year, however, we received a budget increase of over 40 percent and plan to hire as many as 5,000 part-time and full-time employees. I think this reflects a deeper understanding and commitment by Congress and the American people to protecting the unfragmented parts of the National Forest System while targeting resources to the areas of greatest

need, such as our deteriorating road system and fire-prone communities.

Throughout the past hundred years, even as we have used the land to build our homes and to feed and clothe our people, we have created the most extensive system of public lands, wilderness and parks, and wildlife refuges in the world. As citizens of the United States, each of us owns a share of millions of acres of land. This is our birthright, the bequest of our forebears, many of whom died securing the land and the freedom we enjoy.

Gifford Pinchot, the first Forest Service Chief, defined conservation as "the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time." How we choose to use and conserve these resources is a tricky business. As Pinchot realized well, however, conservation is nothing if not about choices left for future generations.

NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM GOALS

The Forest Service has four principle goals for the National Forest System in the coming year.

- ✿ First, to implement the new roads policy to provide for safe public use and access of forests and grasslands for millions of Americans in a fiscally responsible and environmentally sensitive manner.
- ✿ Second, to implement the new planning regulations based upon science and collaboration with communities of place and communities of interest.

✿ Third, to employ science-based active management to help restore fire-adapted ecosystems, and to protect communities, habitat, and drinking water supplies. And, as a byproduct of this work, to provide jobs to communities and wood fiber for markets.

✿ Fourth, to update and strengthen our existing old-growth policy statement.

I would like to take this opportunity to elaborate on the Forest Service objectives in accomplishing the fourth principle goal.

OLD GROWTH

One of the most challenging responsibilities of conservation leadership is to take the long view—to look beyond the crisis of the day toward the future. This was in part what drove my decision to conserve roadless areas.

Gifford Pinchot advocated professional forestry for public lands. Nearly 100 years later, we celebrate his foresight and legacy. Aldo Leopold called for the protection of wilderness areas in the early 1920s and beyond. Seventy years later, the Forest Service manages more wilderness than any other federal agency.

In the 1930s, Bob Marshall advocated protection for large roadless areas. Last week, the Forest Service protected more than 58 million acres of these unfragmented, wild places.

Forestry, wilderness and roadless area protection are all ideas that were initiated and brought to fruition through the efforts of present and past conservation leaders—which brings me to the issue of old growth. Reverence for ancient trees is ingrained in our culture. Some trace it back to tree worship in the ancient old-growth forests of northern Europe. A semblance of that culture remains in Germany's monuments to its few remaining ancient oaks, behemoths that witnessed the march of medieval armies. It echoes in our own cultivation of champion trees, often the sole survivors of ancient forests populated by giants.

The drive for progress and prosperity, coupled with federal largesse in disposing of the public domain, led to vast clearcuts by profiteers who moved from region to region, confident in the belief that America's forests were inexhaustible. First the eastern forests fell, next the forests of my home country, the Lake States. Finally, the entrepreneurs turned to the South and West. In their wake remained miles of slash, fueling enormous wildfires. Hillsides left bare were gullied by erosion; downpours caused flash floods in distant downstream communities.

Leopold wrote a fitting epitaph for the last old-growth maple in the last virgin forest in the Great Lakes region: "With this tree will fall the end of an epoch. . . . There will be an end of cathedral aisles to echo the hermit thrush, or to awe the intruder. There will be an end of hardwood wilderness large enough for a few days' skiing or hiking without crossing a road. The forest primeval, in this region, will henceforward be a figure of speech."

For too long, we allowed the issues of old-growth forests and roadless areas to serve as poster children for both sides of the conflict industry. In the not-so-distant past, old-growth forests were viewed as "overmature" or "decadent" and targeted for cutting because of their high economic values. Today, national forests contain our last remaining sizable blocks of old-growth forest—a remnant of America's original landscape. In the future, we will celebrate the fact that national forests serve as a reservoir for our last remaining old-growth forests and their associated ecological and social values.

In 1989, Chief Dale Robertson issued an old-growth policy statement. Chief Robertson's policy, issued in the midst of a controversial debate over spotted owl protection in the Pacific Northwest, called for standard definitions and inventories of old growth by forest type. The definitions were largely completed, although some might need revision based on new science and new information. New science and technology allows us to map and inventory the remaining old-growth forests with more accuracy and precision.

Updating and strengthening Chief Robertson's 1989 old growth policy will be a priority for the National Forest System in the coming year. I intend to proceed in the following, orderly manner.

Consistent with the direction issued in 1989, we will complete the inventory and mapping of old-growth forests based upon the standard definitions and inventories of old growth by forest type and community that are already developed. These definitions may need to be revised based upon

new scientific information.

A request has previously been issued to each of the Regions to compile and collect this information. Upon compilation of already existing or new inventory information, we will develop manual direction to guide future revision or amendment of forest plan direction and development. Priorities that I would like reflected in the upcoming manual direction will include:

- ✿ The manner that we will protect, sustain, and enhance existing old-growth forests as an element of ecosystem diversity;
- ✿ How we will plan for old growth within a landscape context;
- ✿ Direction to determine the extent, pattern, and character of old-growth at the time the area entered the National Forest System and, potentially, prior to European contact;
- ✿ How forest plans will project forward in time the amount, location, and patterns of old growth within the National Forest System envisioned under alternative management options.

It is my expectation that all of these activities may be completed within a year, and will be subject to review by the Secretary of Agriculture and the Administration.

My intention in moving forward with this direction is twofold: 1) to recognize and protect the national importance of old growth on National Forests; and 2) to focus scarce agency resources to the areas where they are most needed such as reducing fire risk to communities, municipal watersheds, and habitat,

as well as addressing our roads and recreation facility backlogs.

I will anticipate the critics' charge that protecting old growth somehow translates into an abandonment of multiple use and active management.

In fact, the opposite is true. In 2000, we had our worst fire season in years. In response, we developed a strategy to demonstrate how appropriate active management—prescribed fire, thinning and other mechanical treatments—can enhance ecosystem health and resiliency in fire-adapted forests where fire has been excluded. Many million acres of already roaded areas in national

forests are at risk from uncharacteristic fire effects that can threaten communities, water quality, soils and habitat. This is where we must focus our work.

What we do not need to do to accomplish our stewardship responsibilities is to harvest old-growth forests. In some cases, when old-growth resources and values are threatened by the risk of uncharacteristic fire effects, we might choose to carefully thin and burn understory vegetation while leaving old-growth forest ecosystem intact. Restoration will focus on the already roaded and managed portions of our landscape. That is where the risk is greatest to communities, municipi-

pal watersheds and habitat for threatened and endangered species.

We will work with local communities to prioritize and implement restoration projects. That means local jobs. It also means a new way of doing business, a changing focus for our timber program. In the future, timber harvest on national forests will serve as a tool for protecting watersheds, for creating habitat for threatened and endangered species, for restoring our ailing ecosystems to health, for protecting communities.

Taking the long view, our central challenge in the coming millennium
(continued on page 11)

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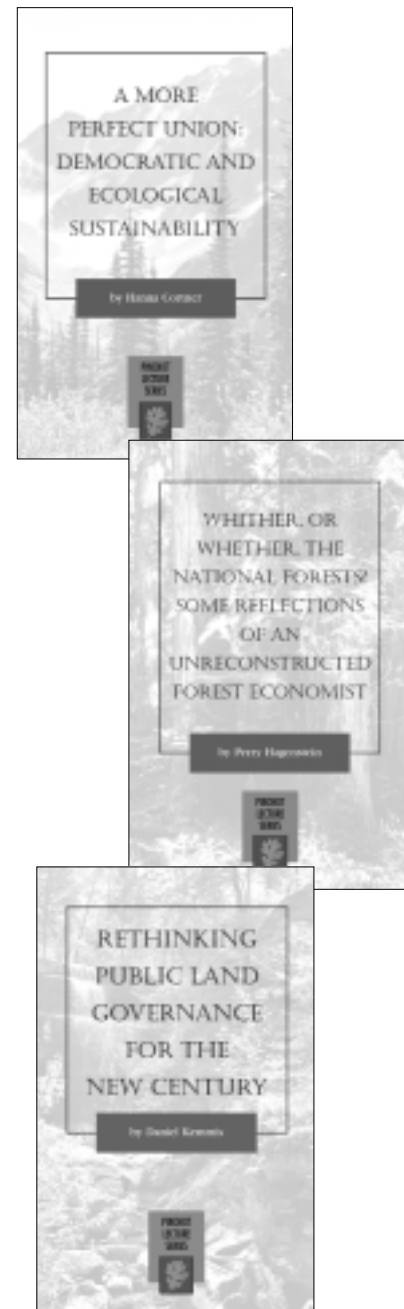
Gifford Pinchot with Rod & Reel & Trading Places: From Historian to Environmental Activist, Two Essays in Conservation History
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The New Face of Forestry: Exploring a Discontinuity and the Need for a Vision
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(continued from page 10)

will be to demonstrate our resolve to protecting roadless areas and old-growth forests while building support for the need to restore fire-dependent landscapes. In the process, we can diminish the controversy surrounding national forest management, provide more jobs and more wood fiber through restoration, and build a constituency for active management based on scientific and ecologically conservative principles.

Mike Dombeck is former Chief, USDA Forest Service. This essay is excerpted from a speech given by Mike Dombeck at Duke University on January 8, 2001, and a January 9, 2001 memorandum to Forest Service senior staff elaborating on the agency's policy regarding the management of old-growth forests on the National Forest System. The complete text of the speech can be found at www.fs.fed.us.