

PERSPECTIVE

Shaping Consensus on a More Effective National Policy Framework for Forests

V. Alaric Sample

Over the past century, forest managers have relied upon the multiple-use approach to accommodate a host of new resource uses and public interests. Measures aimed at stemming further losses of biological diversity, however, have been difficult to achieve without substantial reductions of other desired uses that involve significant human interventions in forest ecosystems. At a practical level, a “sorting out” is gradually taking place, wherein forest areas with extraordinarily high value for protecting biodiversity are being managed primarily for this purpose, and other uses are being concentrated elsewhere on the forest landscape. For example, the final decade of the 20th century witnessed a quantum shift in wood production from the forests of the western US, especially the Pacific Northwest, to the forests of the South. This decade is witnessing a further shift in wood production to both tropical and boreal forests in other regions of the world, as per-capita wood consumption in the US—already among the highest of any nation—continues to grow.

The economic and political signals this sends to other forested countries are ambiguous and confusing. It is well known that most tropical forests are far richer ecologically than most temperate forests, and it is in these forests that most of the current steep decline in global biological diversity is taking place. In boreal forests, scientists are discovering the potentially critical role these ecosystems play in regulating the Earth’s climate by storing vast amounts of atmospheric carbon in their soils. On one hand, we urge

other nations to recognize the global significance of their native forests, and the importance of taking immediate steps to conserve them in spite of any near-term economic consequences. On the other hand, our increased demand for their wood fiber sends market signals that make it increasingly difficult for them to resist making decisions that work *against* conservation and sustainable management.

An effective strategy for achieving sustainable forestry in the US must start by considering our own circumstances from a global perspective. For wealthy, temperate-forest nations like the US to support a credible and ethical program for biodiversity conservation and sustainable forest management in less wealthy nations, our own policies for sustainable forest management must encompass (1) protecting our own biodiversity “hot spots” where they exist, even when it means sacrificing economic values that could have been derived through resource development, and (2) sustainably utilizing productive forest areas of relatively low biodiversity value to help alleviate the pressure on tropical and boreal forests to meet global needs for wood fiber and other renewable resources.

To some, bioreserves do not fit within the traditional multiple-use approach to forestry because those other uses are so limited, particularly in reserves aimed at protecting habitat for species endemic to late-successional forest ecosystems. Such reserves do afford a host of other resource uses, however, and provide protection for other key public values such as water quality and recreation. To others, intensively-managed plantations of fast-growing trees are not

consistent with their concept of environmentally-sensitive forest stewardship oriented to natural regeneration of native tree species, and silvicultural systems that maintain continuous forest cover at all times. But these forests too protect other important public values, and are usually subject to rules—both regulatory and voluntary—maintaining wildlife and fish habitat, air and water quality, and recreation opportunities. Recent studies even suggest that by concentrating intensive forest management on a few areas best suited for this purpose, virtually the entire current global demand for industrial roundwood could be met from as little as four percent of the world’s forests. Reduced pressure on the remaining forests obviously would afford new opportunities for conservation, and protection of biologically critical areas.

In reality, these two types of forest use will probably never constitute more than a fraction of the total area of managed forests in the US. The great majority of US forests, on both public and private lands, will most likely continue to be managed at a moderate or low intensity for a wide variety of goods, services, and natural values. These “working forests” will continue to provide habitat primarily as a function of being maintained in forest land use, with the broad diversity of management approaches on individual tracts of varying size providing an accompanying diversity of habitats in terms of age, successional stage, vegetative composition, climate and landform.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the overarching concept of “sustainable forestry” will

ultimately encompass all three of these generalized categories of forest land use—bioreserves and plantations as well as “working forests” managed for multiple values and purposes. Further, we are likely to see forest lands in each of these three general categories more clearly distinguished from one another than they have been in the past. The dividing lines may not be sharp, but the production-protection spectrum that has defined multiple-use forestry in the past is being extended at either end to include forest management that is more intensively focused on a more limited set of purposes.

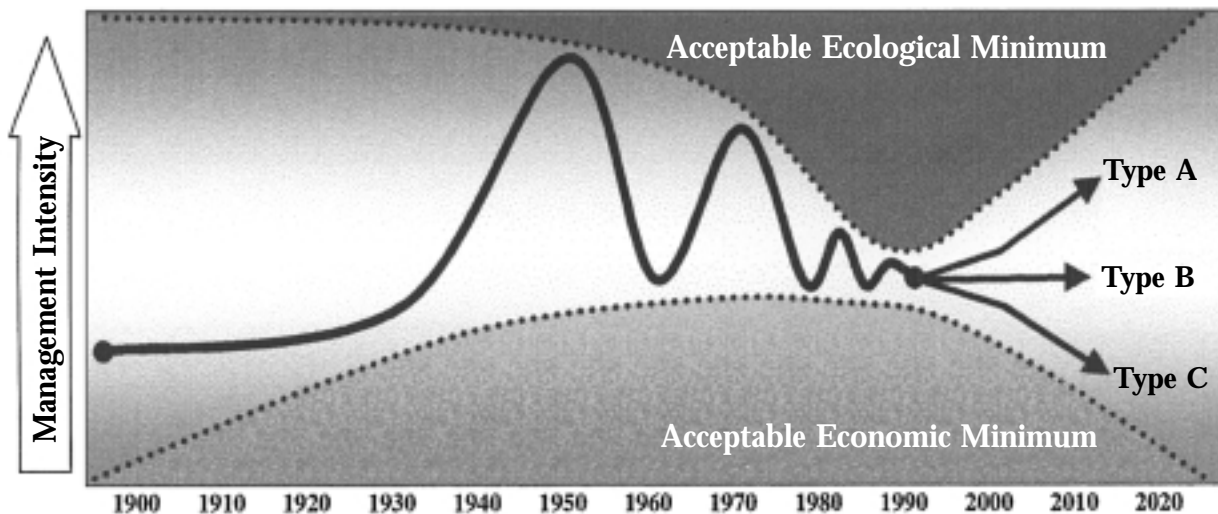
In practical terms, this kind of

sorting-out of various forest lands according to their particular values and characteristics has been taking place for some time. Landowners and forestry professionals who must make the day-to-day decisions in the management of forests both public and private are responding to needs and opportunities as they perceive them locally—with precious little help from policymakers.

The most effective public policy is that which captures prevailing societal values, and then facilitates the realization of those values by *enabling* people to carry out their work consistent with those values. In a democratic society, policy seldom

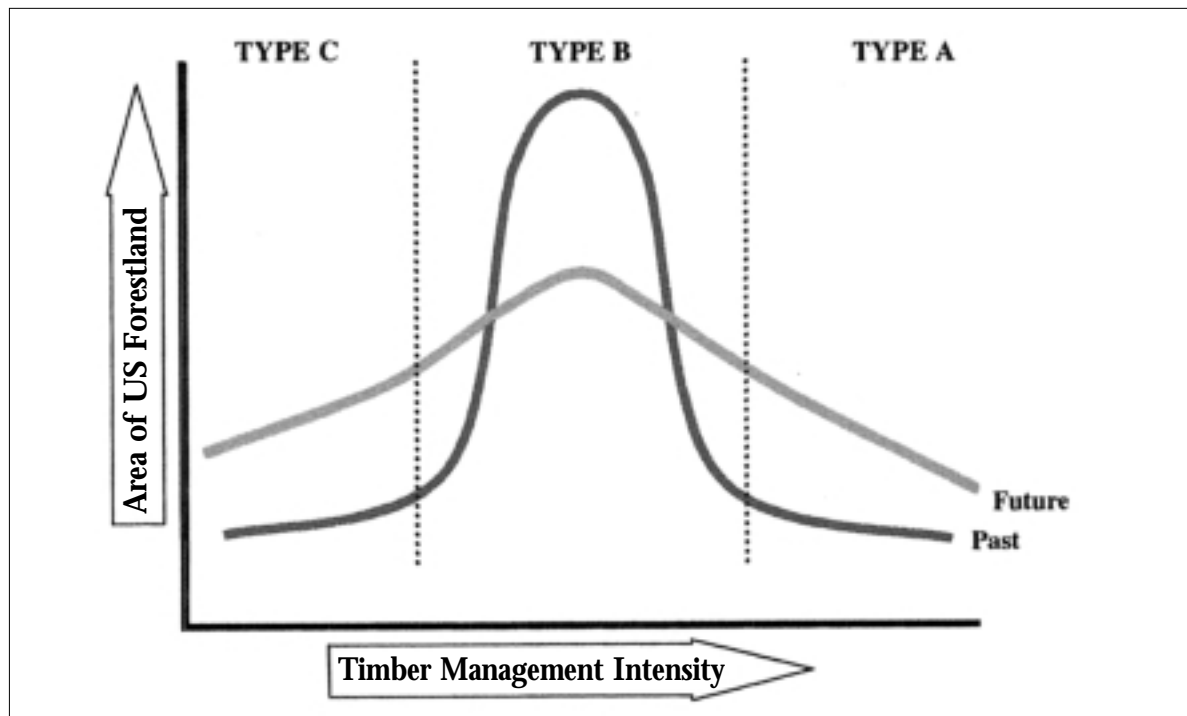
reflects unanimity. It reflects a “working consensus” that enables managers to make decisions that reflect the needs and concerns of the large majority of people affected by those decisions. Often it is the stimulus of a legislative or administrative policymaking process itself that precipitates, refines, and finally articulates just what the working consensus is on an issue. The judiciary exists to ensure that minority needs and concerns are recognized and their rights protected, and that management actions are in fact consistent with policy. Well-conceived and well-executed public policy thus maintains opportunities for challenging management decisions. But it also gives

TRENDS IN MANAGEMENT INTENSITY & FOREST MANAGEMENT TYPES



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TYPE C	<i>Protected Areas</i> = Minimal Management Activity

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managers the confidence that as long as their decisions are consistent with prevailing policy, their decisions will be supported and their work will proceed.

Forest resource managers today, whose work generally reflects the emergent overarching concept of “sustainable forestry” described here, are for the most part operating without the benefit of such a supporting public policy framework. Policymakers have fallen down on the job. The job is not an easy one, to be sure, but it is a necessary role and one that only they can play. Until policymakers fulfill this role, and formulate a more coherent set of forest policies that reflects what is actually working on the ground, resource

managers will continue to walk the high wire without a net.

Crafting an effective domestic US forest policy framework, and taking a global perspective, will be especially challenging for policymakers. But it also opens new opportunities. Clearer policy direction is needed for unequivocally protecting our own globally significant “hot spots” of biological diversity. Similarly explicit policy direction is needed to support sustainably utilizing productive forests areas of relatively low biodiversity value to address our own domestic wood needs, and minimize the demands we place on valuable forests in other regions of the world. These are flip sides of the very same conservation goal. The results of

recent broad-based efforts such as the “vision and principles” for American forests and forestry emerging from the 7th American Forest Congress—along with the results of numerous on-the-ground partnership efforts involving federal and state agencies, forest industry, and conservation organizations—suggest that the raw materials of a working consensus on a more effective forest policy framework are at hand and waiting to be shaped.

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