

# MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

## *Expanding the World's Collective Wisdom*

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Libraries and archives constantly face the question of what information to preserve: Which documents, data, and other content might be valuable in the future? Which can be let go? The issue was the focus of an article in the May 4, 2016, edition of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In "The Risk of Digital Oblivion: What Knowledge Should We Save?" Abby Smith Rumsey recommends that "we should err on the side of including more rather than less, even if we have to keep most of the data at very low levels of curation until such time as people may be able to assess its value, 50 or 100 years hence." She might well have been describing the particular case of historical information related to the environment, since landscape and ecosystem changes often take a century or longer to unfold. One example of strategic preservation of information is the nineteenth-century ship logbooks containing temperature readings that now enable us to study climate change as it may affect us today. Similarly, data taken from long-term forest experimental plots starting in the early 1900s, even if not measured for many decades, can now help us understand forest change under different environmental conditions.

A basic tenet of ecosystem management and sustainability is to save all parts. The more diverse an ecosystem, the more likely it is to be resilient to disturbances and ecological change. Since we seek to be good stewards of the land, should we not then also seek to be good stewards of our inherited knowledge? From an archival standpoint, Rumsey suggests that "the faster the rate of cultural and ecological change, the more unpredictable will be the value of any given piece of information...the more culturally diverse our memory bank, full of seemingly outdated, obsolescent, or backward corpora of knowledge, the greater the chances that we will survive abrupt change through cultural adaptability."

The Forest History Society has been addressing questions surrounding the preservation of knowledge for seventy years. At its beginning in 1946, the Society's first charge was to identify, collect, and preserve forest history. That charge remains at the core of our work and our strategic priorities today. But knowledge is gained only when that information is organized and made accessible. The Society began to address this second aim, to expand knowledge of forest history, by creating unique and powerful bibliographies and databases in the 1970s. We transferred these resources to computers during the 1980s, and now, users can search across many varied content types with just a few keystrokes.

When we interpret this knowledge and help others to interpret and apply it to challenges faced by current and future generations,



we translate knowledge into wisdom—the third aim of the Forest History Society's work. For the Society this is a multidirectional and collaborative process. We do this, in part, by publishing and helping others to publish a variety of books, articles, and visual resources. Society staffers organize and participate in workshops, symposia, and conferences where knowledge is shared. Our reference staff answer more than a thousand direct inquiries each year from students, teachers, landowners, journalists, foresters, scholars, and others with an interest in history, forests, and conservation. Our latest documentary *America's First Forest: Carl Schenck and the Asheville Experiment* was shown more than twelve hundred times on 346 PBS stations in forty-five states. A conservative estimate of the number

of people who viewed the program tops 2.6 million.

In the coming months you will be hearing about exciting plans to build a new headquarters that will transform the way the Society works and contributes to the work of others. Our current facility has served us well for thirty years but is bursting at the seams. Space is critical because during the next two decades, the Society will be asked to accept and preserve the remaining large collections of paper records held by companies, organizations, and individuals working in forestry and natural resources. The new building will expand our library and archives and also include dedicated space for processing and digitization, addressing one of our greatest challenges to ensuring widespread public access to our resources. In addition, we will be able to offer new collaborative space for workshops, colloquia, and symposia on topics where a historical context can help inform forest-centric debates and issues.

With an effective collaboration involving the board of directors and other volunteers, Society staff, fundraising counsel, and dedicated donors, the Society has made excellent progress toward raising funds for our new home. Making this building a reality is our highest priority for the next two years, one that will increase our ability to preserve information, expand knowledge, and help society gain true literacy in the digital, textual, visual, and audio materials that trace the relationship of people and forests through time.

We envision the new library and archives as a future point of pride for the forest and conservation community. And it will be if, 50 to 100 years from now, we have resources at hand that help people assess the authenticity and value of information so that they can make intelligent choices for themselves and society. We trust you agree that this is a vision worth sharing and supporting. □