

SPECIAL SECTION

Americans and Their Forests

A Love-Hate Story

BY HAROLD K. STEEN

In this overview of American forest history, published in the September/October 1992 issue of the magazine American Forests, Harold K. Steen fully demonstrates both his mastery of the subject matter and his engaging writing style.



JAMES G. LEWIS

Unless you are a rock, 500 years is a long time. It is a fairly long time for a forest, too; a half-millennium of natural processes would cause a significant degree of change in floral and faunal composition. Debates continue over whether people are a part of the natural world; but by any measure, human activities over five centuries also would measurably change a landscape. Observance of Columbus's contribution to Western history rightly includes a retrospective look at the American forest.

The pre-Columbian forest had been manipulated for thousands of years. Native peoples burned the forest, farmed the meadows, and harvested game, berries, nuts, and roots. Numbers are under revision, but there apparently were manyfold more of those people than we believed only a generation ago. More important than numbers is impact; the American landscape was neither virgin nor pristine except as seen by eyes accustomed to logged-off and farmed-over Europe. Nonetheless, perception is truth, and the newcomers began clearing what to them was wilderness in order to create a civilization like the one they had left.

Another part of the colonial story happened the breadth of our continent away, as Spaniards and Russians worked to expand empires. But to most of us, the story begins on the Atlantic Coast with settlements north to south. After all, the tale here is told in English, not French or Spanish or Russian—or Cherokee.

To the colonial, as well as to the native peoples, the abundant forest was more than something to clear for farm and home; it was the source of building materials, fuel, game, fruit,

and medicine. The forest was also commerce; trees were sawn or distilled for the domestic and European trade. And Americans had more than something to trade; to carry commerce, their shipyards launched wooden vessels that would become the wonder of naval architecture.

Then came the American Revolution, and a new nation with a lot of land and small clusters of people here and there. Sales and grants of this land—the public domain—would help finance the government and establish sovereignty over western territories. Significantly, this newly created private land had constitutional protection, a major factor as proper use began to be debated.

With the creation of the Department of the Interior in 1849, the role of the federal government expanded from land disposal to include protection and management, moving more and more from a passive to an active role. This trend has, of course, continued to mixed reviews.

The 1860s, like the 1960s, was a decade of American upheaval. Distant coasts became only a telegraph click apart, and there was a railroad to San Francisco. There were also the homestead acts, railroad land grants, and grants to states for Agricultural & Mechanical colleges that would train the cadre of engineers and natural scientists to implement the conservation movement that was just over the horizon.

In the same decade, an immense amount of public land, much of it forested, was transferred to private ownership. A transportation infrastructure was created that made it possible to ship western products to eastern markets. Railroad land grants meant that when lumbermen wanted to move to western forests they could turn to land-rich railroads for vast supplies, as well as to individual

settlers who elected to cash-in on their homestead equity.

Only coincidentally, during the 1860s George Perkins Marsh published his still-influential *Man and Nature: The Earth as Modified by Human Action*. The A&M schools supplied the means, and Marsh furnished the ethical structure, for the rethinking about man and nature that was beginning to be heard on the floor of Congress and at meetings of scientists. A bit more than a decade later, in 1875, a small group concerned about forests met in Cincinnati to form the American Forestry Association (AFA) [renamed American Forests in 1992]. The next year, Congress appropriated \$2,000 to fund a “forestry agent” in the Department of Agriculture. It wasn’t all that clear at the time, but something was about to happen and in fact had already started.

After decades of debate, in 1891 Congress authorized the president to create forest reserves, primarily to protect western watersheds from destructive lumbering, forest fires, mining, and grazing. The Forest Reserve Act had been stripped to the essentials, in order to get the bill through a Congress still very uncomfortable about federal intervention. Thus, Congress had authorized the reserves but had deleted from the bill sections on purpose or management.

It took six more years, but on June 4, 1897, Congress approved an amendment to an appropriations measure for the Geological Survey that determined the purposes—protect timber and water supplies. Timber could be sold and other uses were authorized, but under a permit system administered by a federal agent. In 1905 the reserves were transferred to the Department of Agriculture and the administrative agency was called the Forest Service.

The modern era of federal forestry had begun. But there is more to the story, even back then.

Since the mid-1880s, states—led by New York and California—more and more were accepting responsibility for protection of forests within their boundaries. Industry, too, was involved. Rosters of attendees to AFA’s annual meetings always included corporate leaders along with public servants and members of the public. National and state parks were significant. Yellowstone’s magnificence wielded influence on American thought, and the Adirondack Park in New York, among other things, provided a model for Congress while it considered federal forest reserves. Forestry education began in 1898 at Biltmore Forest School and Cornell University; in 1900 the Society of American Foresters formed to bring professional focus to issues. Finally, the citizens themselves were organizing. We have already seen AFA; the Boone and Crockett Club formed in 1888 and the Sierra Club in 1892. Members of the Boone and Crockett Club—trophy hunters—had been key players during the debates over forest reserves; for the time being the Sierra Club pretty much limited itself to mountain outings, but that would change. The point is, today’s interest in wildlife and the broader issues of environment did not spawn in the 1960s in a bowl of crunchy granola but have been around for a century or more.

In some ways the last century of the five since Columbus brought his news to Europe is a fine-tuning of the basic decisions already made and trends started. By then we had decided that the federal forestry role would be substantial, the states were gearing up to look after private holdings, the industry was looking at ways to combat fire and deal

with taxes, and citizens groups—so significant today—were already wielding influence. But what hadn’t been decided, and still hasn’t, is the proper ratio of activity and influence between and among the various components of American society.

This ratio was tested early on as the federal forestry estate grew from 40 million acres to 150 million. Conservationists got their acreage increase but paid a price; in 1907, Congress stripped the president of his authority to proclaim national forests. Through the 1911 Weeks Act, Congress not only approved purchase of national forests in the eastern U.S. where the public domain was long gone but it also provided for federal matching funds for state forestry programs, and state forestry was off and running. To balance things out a bit, over in the judiciary the Supreme Court rejected state challenges to federal authority. The fight to regulate use and charge a fair value for resources was upheld.

The Forest Service had made a strong pitch to have jurisdiction over national parks, but congressional backlash to an over-reaching conservation movement assured that the parks would have their own agency in 1916. Thus, two federal agencies with recreation, watershed, and wildlife responsibilities reported to different members of Cabinet, managed similar resources in at times different fashions, and garnered support from different constituencies. This apparent duplication of effort was not lost on many observers, and there have been a series of efforts to combine forestry-related agencies into one. Instead, there are even more agencies today: Tennessee Valley Authority, Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Environmental Protection Agency. There has been a bit

of reshuffling, but attempts at merger have come to naught.

In retrospect it seems strange—it must have been a coincidence—that the forest products industry chose the wartime 1940s to mount a major counteroffensive against an aggressive Forest Service campaign that it be given regulatory authority over forest practices on private lands. The agency would continue to press the issue until the 1952 election of Dwight Eisenhower, which ended the effort.

However, during the war/postwar decade of the 1940s, through advocacy and by deed, the private sector worked, successfully as it turned out, to stay the federal lever from ratcheting another notch. Accepting that a degree of regulation was inevitable, the preference was for state controls, rather than federal. In state after state, the industry vigorously supported forest practice acts that would set standards for cutting, reforestation, and fire protection. In a majority of the states where forestry was significant, such legislation was indeed enacted, greatly bolstering the role of state agencies in the broad scheme of forestry things. Tree farms also appeared, and today there are 70,000 farms encompassing 95 million private acres.

And yet another wartime measure is raised here in terms of the inherent philosophical issue on the proper use of public forests. Then, as now, some timber-dependent communities faced a bleak future. In the name of community stability, Congress in 1944 approved creation of “sustained yield units,” whereby blocks of federal timber would be made available only to a mill or mills in a specified area. The assurance of timber supply and elimination of outside competition allowed the local mill to continue operation, with attendant job stability. By 1952 there were six such

agreements in the West, but the notion of federal allotments lost favor in both the public and private sectors and, as with the regulation issue, the incoming Eisenhower administration let the program drop. After all, Ike had campaigned against unnecessary federal involvement in private affairs, and these policies were contrary.

It wouldn't be until four and a half centuries after Columbus that federal timber supplies became generally important; private forests had been abundant and provided ample products with associated jobs. Since the days of Gifford Pinchot, each Forest Service chief had assured the forest industry that federal timber would be withheld from the market until it was needed to supplement private supplies. By 1939 still only two percent of the national cut came from national forests. However, by the 1950s, private supply had been reduced and demand had increased to the extent that federal timber was made available in large quantities. Eventually the federal contribution would become a third of the total. Some saw implementation of this long-planned increase in federal activity as a radical change of policy, an inappropriate and undesirable one at that. The Forest Service, long the public's hero, began more and more finding itself lumped with the same forest industry that it had vigorously criticized for so many decades as means for gaining regulatory authority. The federal pie could no longer be cut into enough pieces to satisfy all sectors of the public; something was needed to sort things out.

In 1956 two bills appeared in the Senate's hopper, one for wilderness and the other for multiple use. The Wilderness Bill was highly controversial, opposed by the forest, mining, and range industries, and most foresters. It would be eight contentious years before the bill

cleared Congress. The multiple use measure fared better; it lay quiet for a couple of years, and then the Forest Service stepped up the effort to move it through the legislative process.

The agency's position was that it had always practiced multiple use, but that increased pressures for those multiple resources made congressional ratification desirable. As others have pointed out, no sooner had Congress delegated broad management authority to the Forest Service than it began a piecemeal effort over the next decades to limit this authority. The 1964 Wilderness Act was just the first in a long string of such laws; in this case, Congress would set aside wilderness rather than continue letting the agency make those determinations as it had since 1924, which had created a 13-million-acre wilderness system.

Clearly, the times were changing, and Congress would no longer grant broad forest management powers to executive branch agencies. There were other changes, philosophically much more significant. Through water quality and endangered species statutes, federal intervention directly on private forest land was now permitted. Times changed still more as litigation supplemented (some would say replaced) statutes and regulations as impulse for land management decisions.

For the past century, those who have managed forests have been called foresters, and the vast majority have been trained in the science of forestry. In response to changing times, those responsible for today's forests are students of many disciplines, including forestry. Thus, as it turned out, forestry is a social science; it isn't about trees, it's about people and values. And the interaction between the several segments of American society and its institutions reflects those values.