

# A Founder's Perspective

## *The Women's Forest Congress Is a Movement, Not a Moment*

BY ELIZABETH WOODWORTH

Arriving in Minnesota on October 16, 2022, in advance of the inaugural Women's Forest Congress (WFC), was an emotional experience. The congress was the culmination of a long-held dream of a world where all people—girls, boys, women, men, transgender—are treated with equal respect and consideration, a world where we all see forests as the answer for the health and future of our planet and well-being.

My feelings of pride and satisfaction were balanced by some apprehension as the magnitude of what was about to happen sunk in. Years of effort, meetings, conversations, challenges, celebrations, and deliberations were all coming to a head in what seemed like an impossibly short few hours, given where we had started on this journey in late 2019.

As a co-founder of the Women's Forest Congress and a proud member of the WFC Steering Committee, I had the enormous privilege of working with a dedicated and talented team of leaders. These women all gave freely and generously of their time and talents over the course of months and years. It was hard to believe that

the work of so many people, whom I count as friends and colleagues, was finally being put to the test.

Any jitters about the myriad details that can make such an undertaking stressful (like technical glitches, vendor no-shows, or last-minute requests) were calmed as I repeated the mantra that my colleagues and I had relied on over and over again during some of the most challenging times in the lead-up to the congress: It's not just a moment, it's a movement! Letting myself see the scale of what we were undertaking gave me the strength to put things in perspective and really soak up what we were about to achieve.

I can't properly express how delighted I still am that this mantra turned out to be a defining sentiment of the congress. It wasn't just a select group of us who shared this; everyone I met at the congress seemed tuned into a vibe that we were all sharing a front-row seat for a moment in history, which will resonate for generations. We were building something that would be much bigger than any of us could have imagined when we first started the planning process.

Delegates and attendees repeatedly remarked on the intense



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feeling of shared belonging that pervaded the congress. Part of this social movement mindset was also reflected in the presence of youth and the congress's focus on helping chart a new course for those entering the forest sector. On a personal level, many attendees shared their wish for their daughters and granddaughters to see the sector as a place to pursue their dreams. And my wish for my daughter is that she be considered an equal among all peers in her potential and ability to pursue her dreams, whatever they are.



I now know, after almost thirty years of working, that the inequities we still face today are not a result of merit. Today I run my own company and hire the best people based on skills and expertise, not gender, skin color, physical ability, or any other societal category. And needless to say, there is no pay gap at my firm. The WFC has helped me, and countless others, take these fundamental ideals and move them forward.

### IT WAS TIME FOR A WOMEN'S FOREST CONGRESS

The convening of the Women's Forest Congress in 2022 was the latest step in the history of American forest congresses, the first of which was held in 1882. It's a safe bet to say that the 1882 congress looked a lot different from the WFC.

American forest congresses have been held intermittently to shape the evolution of sustainable forestry. Congresses helped usher in the U.S. Forest Service and major legislation like the National Forest Management Act. On the world stage, since 1926, a World Forestry Congress has been

held generally every six years.<sup>1</sup> These congresses have helped establish the practice of sustainable forestry that we know today.

The WFC was founded in 2019 to bring new voices and perspectives to sustainable forestry and to create a space to show the world the courage of women to improve the forest sector. We were aware of the important role the congress would play in continuing to write the proud history of women in forestry—a history that is deeper and richer than many may realize.

Consider that over a hundred years ago, women were fighting wildfires in the Mendocino National Forest in California.<sup>2</sup> And in 1910, Eloise B. Gerry became the first woman scientist hired by the Forest Service's Forest Products Laboratory.<sup>3</sup>

Trailblazing Black women leaders have also made their mark on the history of women in forestry—in 1999, Gloria Brown was the first Black woman to realize her dream of becoming

a national forest supervisor when she took over the Siuslaw National Forest in Oregon.<sup>4</sup> These groundbreaking women would probably feel right at home today as members of the WFC.

### BUILDING A MOVEMENT THAT RESPECTS DIVERSITY

Hundreds of women have come together in this movement to share personal and professional

experiences, connect with others, shape the latest innovations, and consider how actions informed by their perspectives can profoundly affect the future of forests. The

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WFC is an open and inclusive movement—trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming participants are welcome, as are women of all ages, perspectives, and backgrounds.

These diverse delegates were asked whether they could speak truth to power and identify actions to improve the forest sector. The answer was a resounding *yes!* And for most of us, the answer involves addressing the fact that women still account for only about one of every five positions in the sector.

It's an understatement to say that the forest and forest products sector currently lacks gender balance and representation. As of 2019, women represented just 16 percent of forestry and conservation professionals in the United States as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Women and people of color are significantly underrepresented, underserved, and historically excluded, which means their perspectives are likely to account for a minority share of existing answers and be missing from upper-level management and top leadership positions.

Typically, in discussions of women in the forest sector, the voices of women of color are marginalized. The WFC is committed to actions that address racial injustice. The WFC believes that Black lives matter. We remain committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion for all women in the forest sector.

### **FORESTS ARE THE ANSWER FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR PLANET**

The many challenges facing forests include a loss of forest resiliency, disrupted wildfire management regimes, wildland-urban interface conflict, transformative market dynamics, political polarization, climate change, and a lack of understanding and trust in forest management. But we were undaunted.

Over an inspiring four days, the Women's Forest Congress solidified our shared conviction that forests are the answer for the health and future of our planet. The WFC also shared and fostered a dream of a world where all people have equal access to opportunities and are treated with full respect and consideration. As the WFC evolves, its legacy will continue to grow as the WFC community acts on new ideas, builds personal capacity, and inspires others.

The WFC helped us all envision a forest community characterized by universal equity, inclusion, and a shared sense of belonging. A community where all voices are heard, supported, and empowered. A community where the influence of all is manifest in our relationships with forests.

Together, we accepted a shared mission to create community and cultivate change. Together, we created safe spaces to connect, inspire, and act as catalysts for change for the benefit of forests and all who rely on them now and in the future.

The success of the WFC shows that when you set a table for more diverse people and more voices, you get better outcomes, more innovation, more progress, and more satisfaction for everyone. Together, we established that the WFC is not a moment but a movement—and it's only the beginning.

### **MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD FOR WOMEN, FORESTS, AND OUR SHARED FUTURE**

My love of forests steered me to focus my professional and personal life on trying to help the world understand the critical role they have in saving our planet. Now, thanks to the WFC, I can work with a group of women, all of whom are on their own journey

and come to this with their own stories, their own pains and joys, and their own personal passion. The WFC showed us we could change the future of the forest sector, embrace the unknown, and dream big together, for the future of forests and the future of women.

The Women's Forest Congress was a moment; the WFC is leading a movement. The WFC continues to thrive on the momentum and to engage with all across the forest community through social media and the WFC website at [womensforestcongress.org](http://womensforestcongress.org).

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### **NOTES**

1. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "WFC: Historical Context," <https://www.fao.org/about/meetings/world-forestry-congress/background/past-congresses/en/>. The first world congress was held in 1926, the second in 1936, and the third in 1949. It has been held under the auspices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) every six years since 1954.
2. Alex Potter, "The Women Battling Wildfires and Breaking Barriers in the American Wilderness," <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/the-women-battling-wildfires-and-breaking-barriers-in-the-american-wilderness>.
3. David Havlick, "Dr. Eloise Gerry," <https://foresthistor.org/research-explore/us-forest-service-history/people/scientists/dr-eloise-gerry>.
4. U.S. Forest Service, "HerStory: Meet Gloria Brown," <https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/delivering-mission/excel/herstory-meet-gloria-brown>.
5. Women's Forest Congress, "2022 Women's Forest Congress Declaration," <https://womensforestcongress.org/2022-congress/2022-wfc-declaration>.