

CONSERVATION COMPASS



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“True Lies” and “False Truths” Distort Natural Resource Debates – Enough Already!

The broad-scale forest fires of 1994, 2000, and 2003 set off another firestorm – one of a decidedly political nature. Heated rhetoric revolving around “true lies” and the “false truths” derived therefrom increasingly mars the debate concerning forests and fires and what to do about their management. The same can be said relatively to controversial wildlife management topics of the day such as those surrounding chronic wasting disease.

A true lie is a selectively narrow statement that ignores equally true and applicable information so that the statement is actually untrue. A recent editorial in the *New York Times* by an eminent ecologist with an axe to grind is a perfect example. He noted that the economic activities related to national forests associated with fish and wildlife, recreation, and water were many times larger than those derived from wood production. He, therefore, jumped to a conclusion that these values were irreconcilably conflicted with timber values and, therefore, concluded that the “commercial” harvest of trees should cease on all federal lands.

His statement concerning relative economic values was true – so far as it went. However, he ignored the reality that the huge increase in recreational use on the national forests, from 1945 to 1995, was strongly associated with the extensive road system that was built and maintained largely to facilitate logging and land management activities. And, he likewise failed to note that numbers of hunted birds and animals were simultaneously increasing.

In other words, as forest management activities enhanced access for campers, hunters, fishers, hikers, horseback riders, berry pickers, and others — some quite significant level of compatibility was indicated. He, simply, derived a false truth from a true lie.

He, then, blithely prescribed “surgically precise” forestry to bring the forest “into equilibrium” where it would, somehow, magically remain. There was no

description of surgically precise forestry, what it would cost, and that this management prescription was untested. In today’s world, such is meat for the Judge’s grinder.

Examining recent “letters to the editor,” and interviews with those who contest endlessly over such matters, provides other examples. One letter writer examined consequences of several selected recent fires and concluded that “logged areas” burned more severely than unlogged areas. Aha! Clearly, “logging” will not reduce wildfire intensity — a false truth. The observation relative to fire effect was true in the selected examples was true enough. But, was the relationship generally true?

Another letter writer, not to be outdone, reported on a set of fires where burn intensity was much less in “logged areas.” So, obviously, logging reduced wildfire intensity.

Both statements were “true lies” in that the data upon which the statements were based was carefully culled from available information to make a preconceived point. Such selectivity produces “false truths.” The best approximation of truth comes from an honest examination of all, underline all, available information by persons qualified to evaluate that information.

The truth that emerges will, almost inevitably, vary with circumstances. What was the silvicultural prescription in the cut areas — singletree selection, group selection, seed-tree, clear-cut? How was the slash treated — crushed, yarded, broadcast burned? What was the plant community — lodgepole, ponderosa pine, redwoods? What was the topography — flat, steep, rolling? How long had it been since logging — days, weeks, months, years? How advanced was the regrowth — seedlings, saplings, poles? Had the stand been thinned — how long ago, to what end? What was the fuels condition — dense and dry, heavy or fine? How was the weather — hot and windy, cool and misty? And, so on. The answers will vary depending upon circumstances.

Most forestry and fire behavior specialists, and all with good sense, shudder when those who produce true lies subject their work and opinions to out-of-context quotation. They despise sound-bite science. So, they hesitate to enter the fray, except through professional channels. That, most unfortunately, has effectively removed them from the ongoing public debate. After all, who wants the job of refereeing a food fight?

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True lies and false truths are easily spotted when eyes are open and “fluff filters” are in good operating order. More constructive and well-informed debate and less demonizing of those in disagreement might help. Trusting to professionals, i.e., “experts,” seems to be increasingly out of style. However, this nation has a cadre of the very best fire behaviorists, ecologists, and managers in the business. We, as a nation, would be well advised to rely more on those experts and less on those who, purposefully or not, spin true lies and evolve false truths. ■

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