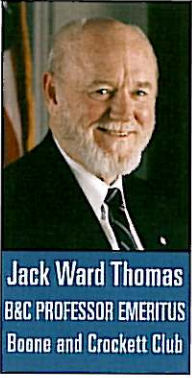


CONSERVATION COMPASS



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Time for a New Approach to Forestry

It is time for a “new forestry” in the United States. Recent declines in forest management have undesirable consequences for forest health and wildlife habitat.

Public concerns over retaining biodiversity (exemplified in the Endangered Species Act) have thrust wildlife welfare forward in forest management debates.

Preservation as an approach to management has become increasingly prevalent. While superficially appealing, such is not tenable in the long run as it will not protect forests from stand replacing events, retain biodiversity, nor provide a flow of wood.

Conversely, a return to totally economically-driven forestry is not viable. Public reactions preclude harvesting at “economic maturity” from being the dominant factor in forest management.

Public backlash to the practices of 1950-1975 resulted in federal and state laws and regulations that set forest management on a trajectory toward ecosystem sustainability. Unfortunately, the pendulum of public attitudes, coupled with judicial clarifications of the intent of law(s), swung too far toward caution and constraint.

Today, most old-growth on public lands is protected with provisions for recruitment over the decades ahead. Most stands are in or are moving into mid-successional forest conditions—the least productive for biodiversity and big-game species. The key to maintaining biodiversity—and game species such as deer, elk, grouse, and turkeys—will be in creating and maintaining an appropriate mix of younger and more mature forests properly arrayed on the landscape.

Adding to the challenge of maintaining such conditions is the nation’s rate of wood consumption. That, per capita and in total, is the highest in the world.

Increasingly, other nations satisfy our demands for wood products — most with less resources and knowledge to manage forests. When we import wood, we export environmental consequences, jobs, and dollars.

Currently, the creation of stands in early forest succession is increasingly dependent upon stand-replacing fire, insects and disease, and blow-down. While such events are inevitable, they are not predictable as to place, size, and timing—factors in attaining desired visual and wildlife impacts. Timber harvesting and stand treatment could play a similar role.

The idea of “letting nature take its course” is seductive in its simplicity but has significant downsides. First, the timing, extent, and results of such stand-replacing events are only marginally under human control. With humans and their works increasingly ensconced in forested areas, forest health degraded to varying extents, and the ability to use such approaches as controlled burning increasingly limited

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by trends in climate, “hands off” management—even for the public lands—is untenable. Forested landscapes have filled up with people and their works in the 100 years since the debates between John

Muir and Gifford Pinchot over “preservation versus conservation” occurred. It is time to let go of the past and debate the future on the basis of today’s conditions and what is desired for tomorrow.

Increasing dependence on “elsewhere” for wood is, therefore, apt to be judged in the long run as morally bankrupt, economically debilitating, socially irresponsible, and wasteful.

Now is the time for a new forestry. Not a simple reinstatement of what has gone before, but a new approach in which the environmental benefits are as significant as the wood produced. We have the know-how, ever improving technology, a significant storehouse of knowledge from research that grows daily, and professionals of many specialties to do the job.

This new forestry, which will vary from region to region and circumstance to circumstance, must focus at landscape and ecosystem scales and be accepting of the myriad values that can be met from our forests — retention of biodiversity, production of wood, clear air and water, and recreation. Intensive forestry for the production of wood on the highest growing sites can meet much of the demand for wood while allowing less intensive management over most of the forested landscape. Meeting more of our own needs can enhance biodiversity and lessen the impacts of our demands on other nations.

The appropriate response to what many, perhaps most, consider the sins of past forest management is not prohibition. Rather, it is a carefully considered change in approach—a new forestry. The old forestry is dead or dying... R.I.P. But we have learned much, enough to institute new approaches to forest management more acceptable and sustainable than what has gone before.

Like all species, humans must exploit the environment in order to live. There is no question of that. The most important question for *Homo sapiens* is how such will be accomplished in a sustainable, and socially acceptable, fashion. ■