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Summary

During the 1960s, public attitudes shifted from reverence for progress to reverence for nature. Resulting policy has unintentionally damaged the environment.

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“By the mid-1980s, the public input process was having a huge impact on forest management and the effects of the new policies were starting to emerge.”

Healthy Forests

by *Linda E. Platts*

During the 1960s, a profound shift in public attitudes took place in the United States. Reverence for progress was replaced by reverence for nature.

Congress passed a tidal wave of legislation addressing environmental concerns and establishing new policies for the Forest Service and other public land management agencies. As this legislation changed how land, air and water would be managed, a growing environmental movement determined to save nature from humans made its presence felt.

New legislation required the Forest Service to consult the public about management plans. Organized environmental groups showed up in force at public meetings to air their views and seek changes in Forest Service plans that they believed favored timber production over concerns for forest health and biodiversity.

A New Environmental Era

By the mid-1980s, the public input process was having a huge impact on forest management and the effects of the new policies were starting to emerge.

The new laws and regulations were intended to provide greater protection for forests. Instead, they often contributed to worsening forest health. The Blue Mountains are an prime example. Holly Fretwell, a policy analyst who has provided congressional testimony on public land issues, writes, “Early travelers named the Blue Mountains for the constant haze of wildfire smoke that surrounded them. Frequent, small fires cleared the understory, allowing the stately fire-resistant ponderosa pines to flourish. Wagon trains traveling west along the Oregon Trail rolled easily between the widely spaced trees of the forest landscape.” In a landscape that was once defined by the constancy of fire, the Forest Service worked to eliminate fires.

Without fire, shade-tolerant firs grew in dense thickets under the big pines. During the 1940s, timber companies harvested the mature pines, which generated the most revenue, and left behind crowded and weakened firs. This created the ideal habitat for the western spruce budworm and infestation spread rapidly. Immediate harvest and treatment could have saved valuable timber and might have prevented an epidemic. Instead, Fretwell explains, it took years for the Forest Ser-

vice to respond. A maze of federal regulations and a lengthy public comment process slowed active management to a standstill.

Today, the Wallowa-Whitman and Umatilla national forests in the Blue Mountains are covered with “gray ghosts,” six million acres of dead and dying trees. The lovely pines are mostly gone, replaced with sickly firs unsuited to the dry climate and vulnerable to insects. In her book *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares*, Nancy Langston, an ecologist at the University of Wisconsin, explains how the dream of improving the forests with scientific management has led to today’s nightmare in the Blue Mountains. She writes, “In trying to make the land green and productive, they ended up making it sterile. . . It was a tragedy in which decent people with the best intentions destroyed what they cared for most.”

The Endangered Species Act was supposed to protect the northern spotted owl in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest of northern California. To save old growth habitat preferred by the owl, usual harvesting and thinning halted. There were many unforeseen consequences of this, including loss of nesting trees due to root disease and infestation and vulnerability to fire. Rather than protect the species, the act appears to have hastened the decline of critical habitat.

The Clean Air Act has also impacted forest management. Any fire set by a federal land management agency must meet air quality standards. Ironically, the prescribed burns are intended to reduce the risk of much worse air pollution that would result from a huge and uncontrollable wildfire. It goes without saying that wildfires meet no clean air standards. Despite good intentions on the part of land managers, citizens still register complaints about smoke from prescribed burns. When that happens, prescribed fires are quickly extinguished.

Private Forests

In contrast, private industrial forests suffer few of the problems seen in the national forests. Boise Cascade owns a forest in the Blue Mountains that is managed for its timber values. It is free from dense undergrowth, sickly trees and bug infestations, and it looks remarkably similar to the open forests of more than one hundred years ago. Private forests adjacent to California’s Shasta-Trinity National Forest are free from beetles and root rot and even provide habitat for northern spotted owls. In the South, the International Paper Company welcomes the public onto its timberlands. The fees it collects from hunters, hikers, anglers and campers have added significantly to the company’s profits. With these incentives, the company is actively managing its forests for valuable timber as well as wildlife habitat and scenic landscapes.

Can these private forests provide valuable lessons for public forests? Should all public forests be managed for the same goals? Or should each be managed for its highest-valued use, such as timber, wildlife, or recreation, but not all of these values? Fires, too, have a role to play in each forest, but it is different for each one. Managing forests spread over such a vast and varied landscape with the same objectives and goals may not be good forest management.

Linda E. Platts is adjunct scholar to Cascade Policy Institute and editorial associate at the Property and Environmental Research Center, www.perc.org.

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Please contact:

Kurt T. Weber
Vice President
Cascade Policy Institute
813 SW Alder Street, Suite 450
Portland, Oregon 97205

Phone: (503) 242-0900
Fax: (503) 242-3822

www.cascadepolicy.org
kurt@cascadepolicy.org