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Wilderness and Foresters: Heritage of the Past...Opportunities for the Future [1]

by

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Just last year, I participated in a program celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Federal Wilderness Act of 1964--a historic landmark in the preservation of wilderness in the United States.

Yet that Act is a brash newcomer compared to what we are here to celebrate today--legislation that, a full century ago, created in this state a protected forest reserve to remain "forever wild" and be managed by foresters for the benefit and enjoyment of New Yorkers, and the rest of our nation's citizens. As we pay tribute to the foresight of those who worked to protect this area, and reflect on the heritage of wilderness and natural areas they bequeathed to us, it is time also to consider an agenda for the future, for continuing the stewardship and recapturing the vision that brought us here. It is an important mission for foresters, for our work with wilderness involves us in something the public thinks is extremely important.

Today, I'd like to reflect on the past, when some early foresters were at the forefront of tremendous public support for protecting resources perceived to be in danger. My examples come from public forestry--which especially in

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[1] Address to Society of American Foresters Public Forum, New York Forest Preserve Centennial, September 13, 1985, 10:30 a.m.-Noon, Olympic Arena, Lake Placid, New York.

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[3] I want to thank the following colleagues for comments on earlier drafts: Doug Allen, Millie Buchanan, Jane Difley, Clare Hendee, Ed Krumpe, Doug Wellman, Richard Costley, Michael Brown and Vance Martin, Bill Coleman and Karyn Richards.

those early days meant the U.S. Forest Service. Next I want to consider how, and why, we've fallen from that leadership position in the perception of the public. And lastly I want to propose a stewarship agenda for the future that I believe will enable foresters to become partners again with the public whose support for wilderness and environmental protection is growing ever stronger. Forgive me if I oversimplify a lot of history and the current complex situation. But perhaps it's justified by a need for clarity of vision about where we've come from and where we might go.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOCAL INITIATIVE HAVE RETURNED

Early leadership at a state level during the 19th century resulted in the Adirondack and Catskill Preserves, which now encompass the largest wilderness area east of the Mississippi. In the 20th century, the impetus for wilderness shifted to the federal stage, with the passage of several acts with national implications, most notably the Wilderness Act of 1964. But now we seem to be returning full cycle. The 97th Congress in 1982-83 passed five wilderness classification acts; the 98th Congress passed 21. Most of them took shape along state lines, and were the result of initiatives by state and local interests working through their state Congressional delegations. Furthermore, eight states, following New York's century-old lead, have now established their own wilderness programs, supplementing the still growing National Wilderness Preservation System. We are at a point once again where the initiative to balance future wilderness allocations against other natural resource programs rests at the state level.

FORESTERS GAVE EARLY LEADERSHIP TO WILDERNESS

Foresters have had a leadership role in the wilderness movement in this country from its beginning. The 1885 law that established the Adirondack and Catskill Preserves provided for a staff of foresters to manage and protect them. On a national evel, foresters were among the first to realize the value of lands "untrammeled by man," and the necessity for protecting them. The names of early foresters like Aldo Leopold and Bob Marshall are synonymous with wilderness protection efforts. U.S. Forest Service wilderness protection efforts--evolving from work by Leopold, Marshall, Arthur Carhart, and others--provided a basis for the 1964 Wilderness Act.

Leopold, out of concern about expansion of Forest Service road systems into the backcountry, proposed plans in 1922 to protect the headwaters of the Gila River in New Mexico. The resulting Gila Wilderness served as a precedent for wilderness designation of other Federal lands in the subsequent decades.

Carhart, commissioned by the Forest Service in 1919 to survey the Trappers Lake area in Colorado's White River National Forest for summer homesites, became convinced that the area should remain wild. His success in selling the idea to his superiors halted plans to develop the region. Carhart went on to survey and work for protection of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in the Superior National Forest in Minnesota--and 40 years later that area became part of the original National Wilderness Preservation System.

The work of Leopold and Carhart left its mark on Forest Service policy. In 1929, the agency established the L-20 Regulation calling for protection of "National Forest Primitive Areas."

In the 1930's, agency concern for wilderness was personified by a New York native, Bob Marshall, whose love of wilderness developed early--the outgrowth of boyhood hikes here in the Adirondacks. Marshall graduated from the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry. His views were also influenced by his father, Louis Marshall, an attorney and wilderness lover, who helped draft the constitutional guarantee protecting the Adirondack lands from development. Bob Marshall's outspoken defense of wilderness caught the attention of his Forest Service superiors and resulted in 1939 in the U Regulations, supplanting L-20 and increasing protection of wilderness areas. True, Forest Service wilderness supporters in those years got a boost from agency fears of losing territory to the National Park Service, and often had to battle the service's production-oriented philosophy. Still, the vision of some foresters within the agency, not public pressure, made possible the first steps toward wilderness protection.

WHY FORESTERS FELL FROM GRACE ON THE WILDERNESS ISSUE

But in the mid-20th century, foresters' leadership in wilderness began to lose its impetus. One factor was increasing pressure for timber harvesting. Depletion of private forests, combined with the post-World War II economic boom and resulting demand for resources, led to a focus on timber yield and intensive forest management that still marks some public perception of the Forest Service today.

A second factor was growing demand from the public for recreational facilities. A revived post-war economy brought more leisure, and more people sought outdoor recreation. At the same time, private conservation organizations were growing, as was public support for their environmental protection efforts.

Foresters and the Forest Service, facing pressures for wilderness protection on one hand and pressures against "locking up" needed resources on the other, caught criticism from both sides. In the years preceding and following the passage of the Wilderness Act, much of the public has perceived foresters, and their employing organizations, as lacking enthusiasm for wilderness protection efforts...although in fairness I should note that another segment believes the Forest Service has been unduly responsive to calls for wilderness designation, at the expense of competing land uses.

Wilderness Purity and Foresters

Ironically, support among foresters for the "purity doctrine," which called for high standards of naturalness and solitude in any designated wilderness areas that might be classified, has been interpreted as resistance to classification, since pure standards narrowed the range of areas to be considered for wilderness. Maybe this was true for some foresters, but for others purity was a legitimate issue of wilderness quality.

Bill Worf, the Forest Service Wilderness Staff person during debate and passage of the Wilderness Act, was a strong advocate of wilderness purity. So were both his immediate supervisor, Director of Recreation Dick Costley, and Forest Service Chief Ed Cliff. My own acquaintance with these men convinces me of their integrity in seeking wilderness truly worthy of the name. The high standards of wilderness purity that exist today in Forest Service wilderness management direction can be traced in large measure to their leadership. Few know that Ed Cliff, as a young Forest Supervisor in Oregon during the early 1940's, wrote the favorable reports leading to establishment of the Kalmiopsis and Gearhart Mountain Wilderness areas that were set aside under Forest Service administrative authority--and were ultimately protected under the Wilderness Act.

In those days there was little pressure for such recommendations--and only vision indicated their ultimate value.

I remember personally heated debates on the subject of purity, during a 1965 trip to the San Juan Primitive Area with a national team attempting to write regulations for implementing the Wilderness Act to manage the newly created Wilderness System. The debates went far into the night, coming to the point where at least two proponents in disagreement decided to make policy with their fists--until they were shouted down by others who had long since retreated to their sleeping bags.

Worf, Costley, and Cliff are only a few among many foresters who deserve recognition for their efforts to protect and manage wilderness. Why then, given a legacy of support by some foresters for wilderness, and continued efforts by many others in its behalf, does it seem that all foresters have now fallen from grace? Part of the answer lies in the public forestry legal mandate--which is also an established ethic of forestry--to seek balanced management of the nation's forest resources. This quest for balance puts foresters in the middle of a tug-of-war between those who want more land committed to production--and those who want more land protected. And clearly, there is disagreement as to what proportion of each would constitute balance. The debate is also fueled by serious issues of resource supplies, economically dependent communities, opportunity costs, and social impacts of land use proposals. It's not easy for foresters or anyone to advocate balance because of the important social, economic, and symbolic values at stake.

Part of foresters' fall from grace on the wilderness issue lies too in social changes, including a trend toward increased public awareness of perceived wilderness values. As the American frontier has disappeared, and as our society has become increasingly urbanized, the awareness has grown that our wilderness roots need protection. In a world characterized by rapid change and complexity that are both exciting and frightening, wilderness represents the last frontier, with comforting stability and simplicity. The existence of wilderness reflects self-imposed limits on the technological imperative that we must subdue all the earth just because we can. The wilderness concept to which early foresters gave birth has become a hallmark of our nation--something a large and growing public believes is important. The public has, in many ways, leaped beyond us in its recognition of wilderness values. How are we to respond to this situation? How can we once again provide leadership? How can we lead toward the right balanace that is needed? These are appropriate questions to consider as we celebrate this centennial of wilderness and forestry.

THE WILDERNESS OPPORTUNITY FOR FORESTERS

First, let's look at the bright side. At no time in our history has public interest in renewable natural resources been greater than now. We should rejoice at the intensity of interest and emotion focused on our concerns. Foresters in the early days longed for a small measure of such concern. It reflects the deep love of Americans for natural resources--and especially their wildlands. True, the attention is a source of controversy over management direction, but the public attention also represents potential support for balanced programs.

Second, let's consider a social change that will affect the future. Today's controversies--over land management planning, road building, use of chemicals, clearcutting, fish and wildlife habitat, wilderness, log exports, and timber imports--are heightened by a current Megatrend in America: the quest for greater local self-determination, for decentralization, and for more involvement of local publics in decisions that affect them. The public is no longer content to rely solely on centralized national policy. Federal direction, support, and decisions must now be coordinated with other inputs. The initiative for action appears to be shifting to local levels--back where it was in the earlier era that spawned the events we are here to celebrate. The resolution of current conflicts depends on local, affected publics negotiating the kind of balanced programs that are acceptable to them. Why shouldn't foresters lead that dialogue? It's our greatest challenge.

Finally, we must recognize that a large part of the responsibility for public perception of foresters rests with foresters themselves. Foresters are identified with the management of forest resources to produce the highest yield for economic use. They are often even seen as merely harvesters--not growers, regenerators, sustainers and protectors of forests. Yet good foresters have always shared with the public a love for wildlands and a determination to preserve, protect and wisely use our natural resources--the quest for a balanced view. We have not done a good enough job of communicating our knowledge, our ideas, and our ethics to the public. Nor have we done a good job of listening to and learning from their values and concerns.

For many people, it is dehumanizing to think that things as important as their forests, their fish and wildlife, their wilderness can be optimized in a computer. Resource plans that are perceived to be centralized, standardized and computerized are seen as dehumanized. As a result, they have little chance of winning acceptance and support from people. Much of the public believes it is really an economic model that drives all forest planning. And people have little faith or trust that complex economic computer models can or will really protect the long-term health and vitality of their beloved forests, lakes, and streams. Surely the outcry against forest plans driven by computer models has been heard here in the Adirondacks.

We need to remove the perception that a black box stands between foresters and the public. We need to be more involved with people. We need to humanize our image, express a broader social purpose for forestry, and make clear our genuine concern for the health of renewable resources. We need to do those things to win trust in our ability to provide leadership towards balanced programs.

WHAT FORESTERS NEED TO DO

I'm optimistic about the potential for foresters and forestry. Indeed, it is my future--and the future for most of you too. But we need to expand our agenda to address the public interest in resources. We need to provide leadership toward acceptable, balanced programs. I want to tell you about my vision of that agenda.

1. We must increase our efforts to educate the public about renewable resources. If the public is going to support balanced programs, it must have more complete understanding of all natural resource values and basic ecological concepts. We have some excellent programs with which to educate. One is Project Learning Tree of the American Forest Institute; the tree farm program that includes 55,000 owners of 87 million acres--many of whom have very emotional and personal ties to the land. There are also countless youth and environmental education efforts. We must expand and publicize these worthy and successful efforts.

2. We need to learn about the public's values. As we strive to educate the public about ecological realities and the need for balanced resource programs, we must also learn to listen--to educate ourselves about the public's concerns and values. Only if we strengthen our communication both to and from the public can we earn an expanded role in the dialogue about balance in resource programs.

3. We must increase our human skills to cope with change. A key to the future of forestry will be increased social and political effectiveness of foresters--especially as we adjust to increased public participation in decisions and management. We need to educate foresters to communicate clearly and listen attentively; to better understand people and social processes; and to be alert and open to real dialogue with the diverse publics interested in resources. When we don't do those social things well, good resource management proposals may be rejected, conflict protracted, or decisions appealed--all because we were not able to develop the balanced programs required for acceptance.

4. We must lead the public in its involvement with resources. Public concern for resources, and emerging demands for their protection, stem from deep-seated beliefs about natural resources that are rooted in our country's traditions. When the public argues for wilderness, hunting, fishing, and recreation, it is expressing its love for natural areas, and its desire to protect a symbol of stability in our fast-paced society. The public, faced with exponential change, wants some things to remain the way they used to be. As foresters, we need to understand and honor those desires, while at the same time working toward balanced programs for the total resource base. The dilemma hasn't changed--how do we preserve our resources and at the same time avoid damaging local economies dependent on their use? What is new is the growing public insistence on being involved in those decisions. You know about that here in New York as you work with the public integrating managed and unmanaged land and wilderness inside the "Blue Line" of Adirondack Park.

5. We must make our principles and ethics more visible. Foresters must be more than technocrats if they are to lead the wise use of renewable resources. Our leadership must be based on our stewardship principles--and we must begin at once to make those principles more visible.

We must emphasize both our principle of balanced uses--recognizing that essential human values as well as material goods and services are derived from renewable natural resources--and our principle of environmental stability as fundamental to sustainability for renewable resource programs. The public needs to understand the multiple use-sustained yield ethic to which most foresters personally subscribe.

We must make clear our respect for the American traditions and values, and the strength that has its roots in our historic relationships to renewable resources. These traditions and values guide us toward what rings true for Americans, and they are root stocks for our future prosperity and balance.

We must espouse our principle of service, first to the local and state communities whose central importance is experiencing a welcome renaissance and second to the people beyond that in our region, nation, and world community. For those who would seek to expand their leadership must first expand their service.

Finally, we must reveal to the public how much we too love the land. It's the real common ground for us and all our publics. Those who are setting the agenda for America's resources--and with whom we are often in conflict--are inspired and strengthened from their open expression of love for nature and our wild lands. We must also learn to be more open in expressing how much we care for and depend on the sources of our renewable resources. We must be clear about the difference between scientific facts, opinions and emotions, but we must also be unafraid to state proudly that foresters love wildlands too and want to protect them.

My vision includes all these essential elements to help secure a brighter future for foresters. We must reach out and embrace the public enthusiasm and concern for renewable resources that surrounds us. Let us be aware that the future will be determined by today's attitudes. As one of our leaders said in a recent issue of our Journal--forestry will succeed as a profession only if foresters' goals and attitudes reflect those of society. Let that concern challenge us to excellence, inspire us to sharpen our human skills, apply our

science and management with new insight, and enlarge our quest for balance through deeper understanding and dialogue with the public. We can expand our leadership. And in so doing we can help teach our nationa, and all nations, that it is the wise and balanced use of renewable resources that will sustain people--in their quest both for material goods and for stabilizing traditions and values. In such a quest for balance we can bring out the best in people, including ourselves as foresters.

So, at this centennial celebration of wilderness and the involvement of foresters with wilderness, let's commit ourselves to leadership in the management of our nation's resources--including the management of wilderness. Let's dedicate ourselves to heightened involvement with the public, and to learning from them as well as teaching them in our quest for balanced programs. As we renew our focus on public service, while making more visible our principles and ethics--especially the love for the land that we share with the public--we can regain our wilderness leadership.