Commentary

The Education of a Forester

James E. Coufal

Another issue devoted to education? What's that got to do with practicing foresters? In a word, everything.

New graduates must meet the needs of the profession, employers, and society, as well as their own needs for a fulfilling career.

In setting standards, SAF's accreditation and recognition programs seek to ensure that every graduate meets certain criteria. Foresters must speak the same language, have a common understanding of conservation history, and share a conservation ethic. At the same time the programs must allow for creativity, regional differences, and disciplinary specializations.

But can we really teach what a forester needs to know in the traditional four-year degree program? We glibly speak of the information age and the half-life of knowledge, yet we seem tied to a baccalaureate program whose four-year duration is centuries old. Some have long argued that the first professional degree in forestry should be the master's, and now employers want forestry graduates with communications and human relations skills as sharp as their technical skills.

It therefore seems timely to consider a five-year baccalaureate program. Will employers pay a salary commensurate with the extra time and accomplishment a five-year program represents? What are the employer's obligations for continuing education and on-the-job training? What impact would a five-year requirement have on the relationships between technicians and professionals, and what would it mean for technician schools?

In its accreditation and recognition programs, SAF uses an input model of assessment: we assume that if the inputs are sufficient—enough professors with the right degrees, enough books in the library, the right courses, a sufficient budget—then graduates will be competent. Should SAF accreditation and recognition focus instead on the outputs, that is, test individual graduates, perhaps after a certain number of years of experience, to prove their competence? That is the model of many other professions; why not forestry? And with the rise of forest certification, is there a need for certified certifiers?

This issue of the Journal addresses such questions. If academia is, as it is often accused of being, a bit out of the "real world," the education of foresters is not. The ivory tower needs your experience and wisdom in shaping the practitioners of the future. Don't be bashful about sharing.

Letters

Held Hostage by Appeals

With all due respect to the Committee of Scientists' report on forest planning, I suspect their recommendations will not sustain the people's land. They will likely fail because they do not deal with the main problem—the wide array of strongly-held personal values in our society. As a result, a long series of appeals, lawsuits, and court decisions have hampered implementation of the planning process. As long as that appeals process remains, constant disruptions will rule the planning process, eliminating otherwise positive aspects of forest planning.

To circumvent this dilemma but still recognize the legitimate right of public participation, I believe appeals should continue for programmatic forest planning but be eliminated for on-the-ground project planning. This will place the emphasis where it belongs: providing broad direction through goals, standards, and guidelines. The wide array of values will still exist, leading to disagreement and lawsuits. Once those are over, however, the public agencies will be free to carry out the direction in the plans, which they are qualified to do. To be sure, this will require some trust that agencies will follow overall direction in the plans. Occasionally they will not, but that is still better than having management held hostage by special interest groups.

The NEPA planning process can, and should, remain as a point of public input for project planning. Only the appeal opportunity would be eliminated.

Once we get beyond the constant (Continued on page 60)
Letters, from page 1

appeals, we can take a close look at what works and what doesn’t in forest planning. At this point I am not sure we know, because forest planning has never had an honest chance to succeed.

Jim Gerber
St. Anthony, Idaho

One Process, Many Decisions
I did not find a place where the scientists acknowledge the worthiness of a local manager to use individual experience, knowledge, and education to make decisions about their district (May articles on the Committee of Scientists’ report).

Instead, there appears much attention about a planning process that fits a multitude of unique situations, like a computer program that quantitatively spits out an answer.

If this attention was focused on selecting knowledgeable, unbiased, and practical leaders as managers we may arrive at the most correct, productive, efficient, and pragmatic approach.

Leave it to a group of scientists to recommend further study. While we are studying water, the barn burns down.

David Banta
Pine City, Minnesota

Assisting the Almighty
Re: “God’s Chosen Species” (Letters June). The 1984 SAF statement on population growth was approved following much debate. Unfortunately, with much less debate, it was allowed to expire in 1997. The need for this policy is just as essential today as it was 15 years ago.

There is no question that the world’s environment has a carrying capacity and God needs our help in maintaining it. The study of history and contemporary observations by this “old forester” illustrate that this capacity has diminished at an alarming rate over the past two millennia.

Ever-increasing population, along with its domesticated animal resources, have continued to affect life-sustaining soil and water resources. These impacts are most noticeable today in the Amazon basin and Asia. Population pressure and poor land-use decisions have resulted in continued tropical deforestation, forcing expanding populations higher up the slopes.

Granted, corrupt public officials (noted by Milauskas [the letter’s author]) have exacerbated the problem, and this situation does not show any promise of disappearing. Isn’t it obvious—where there are pools of poverty, hunger, and unchecked population growth, there will be continued adverse impacts to the environment, along with further increases in the number of these same “hungry” officials?

SAF had the foresight in 1984 to make a stand on population growth. I believe it is time to reconsider this expired policy. We should follow up on Gjerstad and South’s suggestions (Perspective March) and consider adopting a population and consumption ethic.

Let the debate begin anew as we enter the new millennium!

Jay H. Cravens
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Keys to Sustainability
In regard to a June letter entitled “God’s Chosen Species,” foresters who are interested in achieving real sustainability may want to read a front page article in the New York Times (June 7) entitled “Smaller Families to Bring Big Change in Mexico” (available at http://www.zpg.org/Reports_Publications/Reports/report45.html).

Educated youth in Mexico are voluntarily adopting a population ethic, and this has lowered the fertility from an average of 7 children per woman in 1965 to 2.5 today. Some predict this trend will cause Mexico’s population to stop growing by the year 2045.

Education and the empowerment of women are two important keys to achieving sustainability, and I support both. However, some individuals and organizations are against the education and empowerment of women. For the record, I am against a forced governmental or organizational “command-and-control” population ethic. Instead, I believe all parents should be free to choose the number of children they wish to have; this is an internationally recognized human right. If people were
educated, empowered, and allowed to choose, I believe the world’s forests would be under less human pressure.

David South
Auburn, Alabama

A Capacity for Change

Careful scrutiny of the letter by Milauskas (June) reveals a point on which we can agree: People are “very different from any other earthly creature.” The difference is that we can see beyond the immediate effects of our actions on the environment and have the capacity to mend our ways, for example by breeding less rapidly.

Thanks to the editor who, perhaps with tongue in cheek, provided the heading “God’s Chosen Species.”

John W. Duffield
Shelton, Washington

Leeches, Human and Otherwise

In Banta’s letter to the editor (“Make Way,” June) he stated, “I feel we put on the blinders every time the

primary qualification for many important positions is the MS or PhD.” I couldn’t agree more!

Since I received my degree in forest engineering from Oregon State University in 1950, my experience has been evenly divided among forest industry, international and domestic consulting, and teaching forestry at a community college. Included in my experience is a two-year stint with the FAO of the United Nations in West Africa. Government agencies (including FAO) normally require personnel with advanced degrees for international consulting projects, whereas private international consulting firms are more interested in a forester with “dirt forestry” experience.

In my experience as a consultant in the tropics of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, I have witnessed consultants (with PhDs) who lacked field experience (it was beneath them) and relied on local “forest workers” to enter the jungle—with all its attendant discomforts: humidity, insects, snakes, and worst of all (for me), leeches—to do their work for them. Some went so far as to copy a previous report with slight revision, and do little or no fieldwork. To be fair, these consultants that I witnessed were from countries other than the United States and Canada.

One may conclude that this letter is an expression of sour grapes because I only possess a BS degree. Advanced degrees are fine, especially in research, but in the real world of forestry there’s no substitute for on-the-ground experience.

Allo E. Minato
Salem, Oregon

More Than Biology

I want Mater to know that her Perspective (“A Call to Arms,” June) was wonderful.

I was particularly struck by her contention that environmentalists are concerned primarily with the biological realm but that we as foresters should be concerned not only with the biological

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goals aren't grounded in reality

myths are being perpetrated by broberg ("will management of vulnerable species protect biodiversity?" july), if only because the author may not have served in the usda forest service. there was always a statement in every forest plan that annual budgets would determine actual implementation, not the forest plan. on the forests in which i served, supervisors and their deputy or administrative officer selectively followed national and regional budget advice to implement the bias in vogue at the time.

most district rangers of my acquaintance did the same thing, or simply ignored direction and devoted personnel time and funding to whatever they wanted to do after doing what the supervisor directed as the minimum accomplishment. this became more common as internal oversight were dropped, postponed, or shifted to locations safe to overview, as more planned timber sales had their environmental documents redone to incorporate more armor against environmentalist challenge, as more species were added to threatened, endangered, or sensitive lists, and as monitoring and evaluation were increasingly left undone because the results would not be favorable to continuing the forest plans unchanged.

so, broberg's article is a good discussion in terms of law and science but an irrelevant strategy with the same people and their scions still in place to apply the concepts. application of law was similarly flawed with nepa, since many district rangers proved incapable of analyzing effects of a single timber harvest alternative and did not attempt to analyze multiple alternatives.

i spent a career in the belief that forests could be managed to provide multiple uses on a sustained basis, including new needs that surfaced from public concern. but it is not believable that leaders of environmental citizen organizations will do other than stand for policies that will be supported by their constituencies, since environmental leaders inside the forest service did exactly that also. neither produced policies that provide hope and sustenance for people outside their constituencies.

experience shows that appropriations that determine outputs, or implementations that determine outputs regardless of appropriations, will not succeed as long as citizens are willing to oppose them with private funding. the present chief is attempting to find sufficient support constituencies to proceed, and must make the same effort to get plan and national policies implemented by lower-level line officers on forests. until both occur, goals for environmentalists and forests will remain myths.

larry martuglio
winchester, kentucky

shrink-wrapped and sanitized

keye's recent perspective ("our national forests: which path to follow?" july) raises two notions that may be crucial to the future of forestry. first, the american public is not the public it was 50 years ago. it is more urbanized and educated, more removed from "nature." in this supermarket society individuals want food but don't want to see animals slaughtered. they want paper and decks but don't want to see trees cut. everything that is not constructed by humans is romanticized and personified.

second, environmentalists have thrown the most flak into the path of foresters. does this mean that environmentalists are our enemies? the future is not a battle between foresters and environmentalists, those who seek to destroy mother nature versus those who will protect her. for foresters to dramatize this dilemma as a battle is no better than environmentalists thinking forests can be preserved forever. it is not "us" versus "them." we are "them" we are part of the american public and a majority of our compatriots may think that no forest should ever be cut.

where have we gone wrong? just the notion that dozens of us representatives back a bill to ban federal logging should personally insult every forester. secure in the fact that we are foresters--well skilled and versed in our profession--may not be enough. it starts with our neighbors, friends, children, civic leaders, and, maybe most importantly, environmental leaders. we must both speak and listen. there shouldn't be closed-door "war-room" meetings concerning how we will reeducate environmentalists. open discussion, open forests, open doors, and open minds are the easiest way to ensure the future of forestry. we well know how forests change through time in accordance with their changing environment; why can't foresters change?

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