Local Stakeholders Help Make Sustainable Forests

In early April, I spent several days at three conferences that directly or indirectly addressed sustainable forest management. Much of the discussion during these conferences included attempts to better understand ecologically based forest management concepts.

First we covered the basics of sustainable forestry. If my understanding is accurate, the concept is grounded in the connections between a healthy biological system, a sound regional or local economy, and the social fabric of the community. It is not driven by any one of these components but rather involves all three. This, in my opinion, is reflective of what forestry has always been about; all that has changed is the level of complexity of the three components.

Next came an enhanced understanding of an ecological approach to forest management, which involves cooperation at the local level, public involvement and ownership in the management process, a recognition of ecosystem scales and interdependencies, and management based on sound science. According to this approach, it seems perfectly feasible that an individual or small group of landowners could pursue intensive forest management through clearcutting and regeneration and still manage their forests in a sustainable and ecological fashion. In other words, landowner objectives, economic considerations, and sound forest science need not result in prescriptive and overly rigid top-down approaches to forest management.

Indeed, things don't work unless local stakeholders, whether they are the individual landowners or a group of concerned citizens, are involved. National ideas and concepts can be thrown on the water, but if they are not understood or relevant at the local level, they will sink to the bottom, never to be heard from again. Here's a wonderful example of sustainable forestry provided by a Society member in the Pacific Northwest. As a consulting forester, this individual helps manage a parcel that has nine landowners, including a small city and a federal agency. This land, because of its fragile soils and importance to the city, was difficult to manage until the residents decided to prepare a joint management plan for the entire parcel. What resulted was a stable watershed, logging opportunities based on economies of scale, jobs for at-risk teenagers, and revenue to provide scholarships for those teenagers should they wish to pursue a college education. Sometimes, being a forester can be a lot of fun.

Inside the Journal

Rebecca N. Staebler

Scenic Survivors, Genetic Wonders, Omnivorous Pests

Their leaves glinting like hammered gold, quaking aspens gild the West’s spectacular vistas every autumn. But will they always? In this issue of the Journal, a wildlife ecologist presents evidence that aspen populations are dying. Arguing that Populus tremuloides is not a seral species, as is commonly assumed, Kay says that unless forest managers discourage browsing and encourage low-intensity fires, aspen clones cannot regenerate. Kay also offers readers a provocative theory about why elk were historically less abundant and thus less of a threat to aspen regeneration.

Other species of the Populus genus have less scenic value but are no less important. The appeal of cottonwood to the agroforestry industry comes from not just its rapid growth but also its genetic adaptability, which has prompted the development of transgenic trees resistant to herbicides. Plant them like corn, spray the field with Roundup®, and watch them grow! In a paper that frames the important issues and will surely stimulate discussion both inside and outside the forestry profession, Strauss et al. explore the silvicultural benefits and genetic risks of this technology and identify specific areas that need more research.

The gypsy moth, an exotic pest that has eaten its way through eastern North America, is a gourmand whose taste runs from aspen to willow and just about every oak in between. What will happen as these defoliators move west? Liebhold et al. show the susceptibility of forests across the country and, as alternatives to spraying, suggest silvicultural practices that can minimize damage to hardwood stands.

Our last two articles take us to the fertile ground of policy research. Williams and Ellefson answer an important question for managers trying to reconcile landowners’ conflicting interests: what makes a successful partnership for land management? Whatever form it takes, collaborative planning appears to be well integrated into the national forests, Selin et al. have found. As one Forest Service planner said, “It’s not a matter of whether collaborative planning will be used, but only how.”