WELL-GROOMED LANDS


One may safely judge this book by its cover: Its single image—a photograph of a southern slash pine plantation, even-aged trees marching off in uniform rows into an ever-receding distance—perfectly captures the book’s focus on forests as managed landscapes. This emphasis is consistent with the intended audience of The Southern Forest; in a prefatory comment, R. Scott Beasley, dean of the Arthur Temple College of Forestry at Stephen F. Austin State University, notes that this volume is for the “serious student” of forestry. Its authors are themselves serious researchers; the late Laurence Walker taught, and Brian Oswald continues to teach, at SFASU, and they bring to this work a wealth of field experience and pedagogical insights. It seems perfectly appropriate, therefore, that some of the more than 200 photographs that illustrate this volume (among them the cover shot) come from the authors’ collections. For them, forestry is a matter of learning how to see.

Training those eyes is complicated, and to judge from the text’s organization requires learning from the ground up. The opening set of chapters, for instance, establishes the geographical range and ecological dynamics of the southern forest. Walker and Oswald argue for a broad definition of its boundaries, including “the principle range of the hard pines” from Texas to New Jersey, the Appalachian pines, hardwoods, and firs, as well as the woods of the Ozark Plateau and those encompassed in Post Oak Belt of Texas. This mapping of the land is further laid out along physiographical lines, from the Coastal Plains, to the Piedmont, Plateau, and Highlands, and the lower alluvial plain of the Mississippi. In each area, the reader is introduced to the impact of climate, soil, and biota on tree growth, and the role that “the continuity of settlement and development” has played in the harvesting of regional woodlands.

Human encroachment on the original forests of the South, and the vast tracts that consequently have fallen before the axe and chainsaw, form the backdrop to the second half of the book, which is devoted to the reestablishment, protection, improvement, and regeneration of once-cutover lands. Explanations of the growth rates of various species; discussions of seed viability, production, site preparation, and planting; and assessments of vegetative propagation go hand-in-hand with analyses of the weevils, moths, beetles, and blights—and human-generated pollution—that complicate foresters’ management plans. Given equal billing are the techniques that allow these managers “to go on the offensive to maintain vigorous stands of timber,” an arsenal that ranges from thinning to prescribed fire to herbicide treatments. In a final chapter, the authors sketch out some of the competing uses and values of forests, especially evident since the emergence of a more powerful environmental movement in the post—World War II era.

The resulting, and ever-evolving, regulatory regime, and the shifting social perspectives and biological insights that have brought it to life, challenge some of the book’s central assumptions. Its fixation throughout on the economic outcomes of forestry, and the array of wood and pulp these wooded lands can produce, is rattled when in chapter 9 readers finally learn that the Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960 proposed the creation of a wider range of outcomes. More jarring still are recent legislative initiatives that have granted priority to ecosystem management. “Sustainability of a site as an ecosystem,” Walker and Oswald admit, “replaces sustained yield of forest products as the aim of forest management,” an admission that has tremendous implications for how forestry is taught, practiced, and written about. It is only at the end that students learn that the ideas they are absorbing have evolved over time, only then that they recognize that foresters do not operate in a vacuum. Those critical lessons were once part of forestry curricula and instruction; the founders of the first schools—Carl Schenck (Biltmore), Bernhard Fernow (Cornell), and Gifford Pinchot (Yale)—did not shy away from detailing the economic, legal, political, and social landscapes through which their students would move. Their modern counterparts should know as much.

—Char Miller
San Antonio, Texas