GOOD LIVING, GOOD FIRES

It is no coincidence that Thomas Cole's majestic oil painting "The Oxbow" (1836) graces the cover of this ambitious synthesis of five centuries of environmental change in the temperate New World. His canvas of the famed bend in the Connecticut River sets a gnarled and dark-wooded mountainside to the river's west against a sun-dappled pastoral landscape to its east, brilliantly capturing one of the central tensions in the American imagination—that between nature and culture. This is the terrain Gordon Whitney's new book explores as well, an exploration of the complex relationship between wilderness and civilization that Cole's brushwork evokes.

This is not a new topic. Thomas Cox and his coauthors (This Well-Wooded Land, 1985) and William Cronon (Changes in the Land, 1983) are among those scholars who have studied the physical impact of European settlement on the continent, and on whose work Whitney's insights depend. What distinguishes From Coastal Wilderness to Fruited Plain is its broad coverage of time and place; unique too is its close analysis of a wealth of documentary evidence and interdisciplinary field studies. From these primary and secondary sources, Whitney carefully reconstructs the historic ecology of the northeastern quadrant of the future United States and then assesses the astounding transformations that agricultural production and industrial exploitation unleashed. "Few areas on the earth's surface," he notes, "have experienced as extensive and dramatic change in their flora and fauna as the mid-latitude forests and grasslands of eastern North America."

Nowhere were these alterations more stark than in those soon-to-be-logged forests. Although Whitney is careful not to fall into the romantic assumption that an "ocean of woods" once swept from Maine to the Old Northwest, or accept John Bartram's assertion that the trees were so thick that "the sun had never shone on the ground, since the creation," he provides ample evidence of the rapid reduction of the nation's forested estate. Much of it fell before the ax of settler and lumberman, of course, but not all. Livestock grazing in woodlots, for instance, not only damaged the reproduction of certain species but thereby changed the composition of these stands. More devastating still was the massive consumption of wood as fuel for 19th-century steam engines, iron industries, and home fireplaces. By 1815, Philadelphians annually burned approximately 210,000 cords of fuel-wood; in New England and the Midwest total consumption peaked at about 90 million cords per year in the 1870s, staggering numbers that confirmed Puritan Francis Higgeson's claim of 250 years previous: "Here is good living for those that love good fires."

No wonder many Americans feared a timber famine at the century's close. The shift to coal undercut that intense anxiety, however—a shift that when linked to the steep decline in the number of small farms, enabled the northeastern forests slowly to recover. It is precisely this kind of multifaceted and complicated interpretation that marks Whitney's book throughout and makes it such a rich trove.

—Char Miller
San Antonio, Texas

Lodgepole Encyclopaedia

Peter Koch, known for his seminal work on southern pines, has now produced a comprehensive and remarkably cohesive examination of lodgepole pine (Pinus contorta) that should prove of major interest to practicing foresters and researchers. Delivered in five major parts over three volumes, the work eloquently synthesizes available research on topics from physiology and silviculture to harvesting and product derivatives. The text is well supported throughout with photos and illustrations and is accompanied by extensive citations to the published literature on lodgepole pine. There is also a comprehensive index.

Koch's main objective is to stimulate intensive management of lodgepole pine and promote the efficient use of this resource. He lucidly describes the growing importance of lodgepole pine, which was once an underutilized species and is now an economically important source of raw material in North American commercial forestry. Substantial volumes of available mature lodgepole pine, combined with a relatively short rotation and highly mechanized harvesting, make lodgepole pine an appealing source of wood fiber.

Koch sets a framework for the utilization of lodgepole pine by examining management options and harvesting systems. Decisions made before harvest will affect characteristics of the harvested log: knot size, specific gravity, compression, wood content, and spiral grain. Given the accelerated pace of technological change and the constant evolution of wood products, it is difficult to determine the optimal harvesting system that will yield the product in greatest demand. Historically, lodgepole pine was used for ship masts, charcoal, paneling, shingles, and shakes. More recently, it has been used for structural plywood, fiberboard, particleboard, and laminated veneer lumber, as well as for paper and packaging.

Shorter rotations, accomplished through species selection and efficient silviculture management, will be critical components in the emerging era of capital-intensive forestry. Koch's book provides important insights for progressive forest management as the western North American forest industry moves away from the natural endowment of old-growth, high-quality timber to a product mix with more engineered wood and other value-added
products—a mix in which lodgepole pine will be increasingly important.

Lodgepole Pine in North America is an invaluable reference. The 13 years of data collection and research that went into this work have paid handsome dividends.

—Barb Condon, Bill Wilson
Victoria, BC, Canada

**BRIEFLY NOTED**


“Of the past thirty or so years the country has changed from faith in unlimited abundance to fear of living on a fragile planet with limited resources,” writes Jean Mater, a Fellow of the Society of American Foresters who has long been interested in the public’s involvement in forest industry affairs.

“Forests are the first victims of our frustration with the prospect of enjoying less of the earth’s bounty than we have come to expect as our right in the twentieth century.” To bridge this chasm, the author says, “the forest industry must substitute new practices for many of the traditional methods once acceptable...With scientific and responsive forest management so essential for today and the future, the public also suffers from the negative perception of the forest industry.”

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