Should hospital administrators or candy stripers diagnose serious medical problems and perform complicated operations? The answer is obvious. However, a comparable scenario is occurring in our profession. Forest managers have been forced out of leadership roles and replaced by other professionals. A doctor and forester certainly need to cooperate with those outside their fields to do their jobs; however, each is best qualified to decide on and deliver treatment to their “patients.”

Nowhere is the undermining of our profession more evident than in public forest management. A recent JOURNAL OF FORESTRY article stated that the USDA Forest Service has reduced the number of foresters in management and replaced them with landscape architects, botanists, archaeologists, and engineers (Richard Fisher, March 1996). The same article recognizes a trend that is contributing to the problem: “foresters today spend more time analyzing and manipulating data than they do collecting it.” We cannot manage a forest from a computer unless data is collected in the field. With sampling intensity decreasing, most inventory systems are unable to extract stand-level data with an acceptable level of error. How, then, can stand prescriptions be written and implemented?

Preservationists have pressured the Forest Service leadership into becoming excessively “green” and politically correct. In so doing, they have practically destroyed a once elite government agency. Granted, we needed to give more attention to forest amenities. However, most critics of public forest management ignore that a well-managed forest provides the best sustained yield of timber, endangered species habitat, and aesthetics. Forest management on public lands had already evolved to incorporate a reasonable level of stewardship when the preservationist movement hit its stride about 20 years ago. There was no rationale for a drastic shift in management tactics.

A need did exist for preserving truly unique forests, and we have. Millions of acres of wilderness, old-growth, and wetlands have been designated for this purpose. Ours is one of the few countries with such a wealth of national parks, wild and scenic rivers, and habitats for endangered species. This was desirable to a point, but reason has long since been abandoned. As more land is taken out of commercial forest production, fewer acres are left to provide our citizens with the basic wood products. Curtailing timber harvests on national forests and stopping all harvests on land to be set aside has caused the price of lumber and other forest products to be nearly prohibitive.

Those obstructing timber harvest on public lands are successfully squelching professional forest management. Their weapons: emotionalism and pseudo-science. If not one “endangered species,” any other furry or feathered critter would be the ploy to persuade the uninformed that trees should not be cut. The preservationist’s mission has little to do with saving species and everything to do with stopping timber harvests. This vocal, well-funded minority is undermining the fiber of our nation’s greatness: the free enterprise system and the right to truly own property.

US forest management must be given back to trained and experienced foresters; they are best qualified to scientifically manage our most important renewable natural resource. Foresters need advice and assistance from other natural resource managers. However, foresters should provide the leadership in this area, in consultation and collaboration with (not under the direction of) professionals from other disciplines.

Foresters have a proven track record. They orchestrated the greatest conservation success the world has known. Our nation’s forests were depleted by conversion to agriculture and nearly destroyed by indiscriminate cutting and wildfires from the late-1800s through the mid-1900s. Foresters are primarily responsible for the reforestation and protection of the resource since that time. For example, West Virginia’s forests occupied only 30 percent of the state’s land area in 1910. Today, West Virginia is 80 percent forested.

Steps can be taken to put foresters back in command of the forest resource and keep our profession intact. The first is to put forest management professionals back in all leadership roles in the Forest Service and state agencies. The second is to return all of the schools of environmental science back to colleges of forestry led by directors whose primary areas of expertise are in forest management. The colleges could contain divisions dealing with wildlife, utilization, recreation, and environmental concerns. Directors would ensure that the fundamental forestry courses are retained and that all faculty have degrees and practical experience in forestry.

Finally, voting privileges in the Society of American Foresters should not be extended to those from other disciplines. There are more reasons to give forest technicians the right to vote. After all, engineers and wildlife biologist have their own professional societies in which foresters are not permitted to be members, nor should they be.

I have no animosity toward other disciplines, but when I needed a major operation recently, I called on a medical professional. I certainly did not have a forester perform it!

About the Author

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