TEN YEARS AFTER

Books based on conference proceedings often seem less than the sum of their parts. Happily, Forest Futures: Science, Politics, and Policy for the Next Century avoids this fate in its tour of the legacy of the Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team (FEMAT) and the resulting Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP). Many of the 18 contributors are familiar figures in this controversy, and it is the juxtaposition of their views rather than any single paper that provides food for thought.

The book considers sustainability, the role of science in policymaking, endangered species, and forest futures and challenges. In the first section, Jack Ward Thomas repeats his belief that the Endangered Species Act is the principal driver of federal forest policy. But he is also highly critical of the federal government’s failure to implement NWFP. Citing resistance to harvest in old-growth stands, the economic and technical consequences of the survey and manage protocols, and failure to pursue active management, he asks, “How can we discuss sustainability of outcomes for a plan that has never been executed?”

Ecologist David Perry finds that NWFP may have come too late to make a difference. Thousands of hectares of old-growth habitat have been lost to wildfire while an unknown but large amount of northern spotted owl habitat has been degraded or lost to barred owls—“significantly faster,” he concludes, “than it is being created by maturing forest—we are literally losing ground.”

John Beuter suggests that sustained-yield forest management that achieves a balance of age classes across the landscape offers maximum sustainable harvests and related economic and social benefits. He argues that “non-federal lands in Oregon have, in aggregate, demonstrated harvest sustainability” and suggests these successes are the result of multiple owners’ managing with diverse objectives—Adam Smith’s invisible hand. He believes that NWFP represents people’s values derived through the political process, not the marketplace, even though “the political process was characterized by less than perfect, if not distorted, knowledge…” He does not assess the shortcomings of markets.

In the second section, Ronald Mitchell et al. seem to suggest that the planets rarely align such that large-scale environmental assessments affect policy. Frederick Swanson thinks scientists can do more to promote learning among managers and citizens. Daniel Rolf recounts the use of science to mask policy advocacy. Roger Pielke Jr. offers an interesting dichotomy about the kinds of questions (“what is” versus “what ought”) that science can answer. For the sake of brevity, let us conclude that the role of science in this political process was limited.

The section on threatened and endangered species adds little, although Steven Acker’s careful presentation of spotted owl monitoring data confirms the difficulty of determining species viability: “... the risk of extinction is likely to increase through time even without further habitat loss.” Susan Jane Brown and Richard Stroup present the views of environmental advocates and free-market environmentalists, respectively.

A summary section is both provocative and puzzling. Former Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber urges us to reframe the seemingly intractable Northwest forest conflict by taking a broad view of forest health—in contrast to the focus on fuel reduction in President Bush’s Healthy Forest Initiative—and building trust by increasing local decision authority. He suggests that NWFP has fallen short because it lacked an overarching policy objective to drive management strategy. Rather, it simultaneously attempted to protect endangered species’ habitat, sustain timber harvests, and coordinate federal agency activities. Kitzhaber predicts that “By trying to maintain parity between multiple goals, the NWFP... is not politically sustainable over the long run.”

Editor Joe Bowersox applies theories derived from disturbance ecology to Northwest forest politics. The political ecology analogy seems forced as he pays backhanded homage to the effectiveness of Sen. Larry Craig and Mark Rey in advancing their forest policy agenda.

Many foresters will find Margaret Shannon’s postmodern analysis of the FEMAT and NWFP confusing. She calls NWFP “a vision for a new future forest policy” meant to transform forest policy and, one might speculate, the political culture of the region. Postmodernism suggests that preferences are created by policies rather than the converse and that “how we represent what we observe creates what we understand.” Shannon seems to suggest that a group of “normal” scientists (the science, not the individuals) gathered in small quar ters over a short time under intense political pressure deliberately created a postmodern plan. This seems somewhat akin to cold fusion. We see now that the well-intentioned participants overestimated the ability of the agencies to implement the plan and the political will of the appropriators to fund it. It is the same lesson we failed to heed about federal forest planning and management in the 1970s.

Bob Pepperman Taylor reminds us, “Democratic public policy will always be less than fully consistent or coherent; the confusion of policy values and goals ... is to be expected in democratic societies.” That observation oft eludes the foresters and professional societies closest to the fray.

When we enlarge our perspective, we see the interactive effects of biophysical, political, and economic systems. Within these, each of us has preferences that can be aggregated only through combinations of authoritative public policy and markets. Each combination has benefits and costs, and no combination satisfies all parties. The principal lesson in this controversy is that few elected officials, agency administrators, and interest groups will publicly acknowledge that we can’t have it all.

In choosing Option 9, the Clinton administration attempted to finesse a decision that satisfied all interests. But the management agencies did not have the resources to implement the plan, the regulatory agencies did not have the flexibility to embrace adaptive management, and the environmental and timber interests saw no benefit in compromise. Choosing one option may foreclose others. When we advocate a particular solution, let us be clear about the options forgone.

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Books
