A Call to Arms

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Many of us have read the six-point philosophy articulated by Harry Wiant, past-president of the Society of American Foresters: foresters love but don't worship forests; management of forests is necessary for human survival; biodiversity, however good, should not always override other considerations; the focus on ecology threatens our economic prosperity and basic freedoms; forest management must be science based; and an ethnocentric philosophy appreciates the value of human beings in contrast to the depreciation implied by the biocentric philosophy espoused by environmentalists.

That philosophy is logical, sensible, and conforms with what most of us learned in forestry. That it is not widely adopted or practiced is a source of great frustration. We gnash our teeth that the public is so ignorant of the value of managing forests, of the uniqueness of wood, of timber production, of the necessity to produce.

But do most citizens in our country agree with that philosophy? Does it provide for new protocols in the use of land and resource that are required by the rapid growth in population? Is it in harmony with the shock wave of demographic changes, particularly the generations schooled since the 1970s who now constitute the majority and who have adopted the environmental culture? Does it resonate with the dramatic changes in technology, in our work practices? Do people understand the value of this philosophy?

The answer to those questions is inescapably “No.” The media, educators, legislators, agencies, and international officials consider the forest industry and foresters out of sync with the current world. Foresters have not won the public trust. We haven't even won the public's desire to pre-serve forests by using wood substitutes. Some of us have even given up the struggle for meaningful forest management and are substituting politically correct management philosophies.

And we hear calls to battle, to rectify the incorrect perceptions and the resulting skewed power base. Surely the world has too much at stake for us not to fight the good fight. But it is not clear whom we are to fight, exactly what we hope to win (other than a return to some status quo we once enjoyed), what ammunition we have, what weapons we are willing to use. What strategies will we employ? What tactics? And most important, where are our troops? The livelihoods of some 25 million people in the United States depend on timber, but 90 percent of them do not know or understand the relationship between the forest and their paycheck.

Some foresters propose education as the major weapon. Education is noble, but throwing facts at listeners does not convince them or change their opinions. Study how the environmental activists succeeded in persuading Americans to adopt the environmental culture: they cloaked their facts in persuasive emotion. When John McGuire was chief of the Forest Service, he used to say, “Emotions are a fact, too.” But as professionals we find emotions un-scientific, so we avoid them—and keep losing the battles.

Forestry professionals are attempting to win the public trust. We devise earth-friendly terms to describe our management objectives—sustainable forestry, ecomanagement, forest health, stewardship, and other warm, fuzzy terms—but few in our audience have a clear idea of the relationship of these terms to the environment. The movement toward certification of environmental forest management demonstrates that the industry is now part of the environmental culture rather than the enemy of forests. We are still trying to influence people by rational explanation, but our intended audience isn't listening.

All of us in the forest industry urgently need to get together to develop our own sound bites on forestry issues. We need to study persuasion more than education. We resent and scorn the effectiveness of environmental activists, yet we are unwilling to become smart forest activists ourselves who can use some activist techniques for the good of the forest without impairing our professional status. Fragmented efforts to win in the court of public opinion will not work: we can win only if we work on a national level.

A great opportunity is approaching: Earth Day 2000. The first Earth Day in 1970, pushed the environment into the public consciousness. The millennium Earth Day could serve as a turning point for forestry and help us regain respect for our profession as an essential element in the world’s history.

The forest industry has been stuck too long in the rut of “educating” the public and doing public relations. We need to broaden our arsenal of weapons of war.

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