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Selling Out Our Forests

By *Edward O. Wilson*

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The fires that have savaged forests of western North America this summer are the ecologist's equivalent of a perfect storm. The combination of record drought, high temperatures and abnormally thick layering of fallen debris has turned millions of acres into tinderboxes that await only a lightning strike or stray campfire ember to ignite.

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The best way to avoid catastrophic fires is by trimming undergrowth and clearing debris, combined with natural burns of the kind that have sustained healthy forests in past millennia. Those procedures, guided by science and surgically precise forestry, can return forests to near their equilibrium condition, in which only minimal further intervention would be needed. The worst way to create healthy forests, on the other hand, is to thin trees via increased logging, as proposed by the Bush administration.

The health-by-logging approach arises primarily from an economic motivation in forest management, and reveals the wide separation between two opposing views concerning the best use of U.S. forests. The administration, seeing the forests as a source of extractive wealth, presses for more logging and road-building in wilderness areas. Its strategists appear determined to mute or override the provision of the 1976 National Forest Management Act requiring that forest plans "provide for the diversity of plant and animal communities."

Environmentalists and ecologists, defending the provision, continue to argue that America's national forests are a priceless reservoir of biological diversity, as well as a historical treasure. In this view, the forests represent a public trust too valuable to be managed as tree farms for the production of pulp, paper and lumber.

The economic argument for increased road-building and



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logging is unfounded. It is contradicted by the U.S. Forest Service's own measure of forests' contributions to the nation's economy. Of the \$35 billion yielded in 1999 (the last year for which a comprehensive accounting was published), 77.8 percent came from recreation, fish and wildlife, only 13.7 percent from timber harvest, and the modest remainder from mining and ranching. Roughly the same disproportion existed in the percentages of the 822,000 jobs generated by national forests.

And that is only part of the story.

The Forest Service's accounting does not include long-term profits that accrue indirectly from natural habitats. These additions derive from peripheral tourist facilities and other businesses attracted by the amenities of pleasant environments. Such economic growth is all but absent in the case of logging and other extractive industries, for the obvious reason that Americans do not find mill towns and logging roads appealing. In a nutshell, current federal policy is promoting a proportionately minor income producer to the detriment of the dominant income producer.

And there is more. If we have learned anything from scientific studies of forests, it is that each such environment is a unique combination of thousands of kinds of plants, animals and microorganisms locked together in virtually endless webs of competitive and cooperative relationships. It is this biological diversity that creates a healthy ecosystem -- a self-assembled powerhouse generating clean water, productive soil and fresh air, all without human intervention and completely free of charge.

Each kind of forest or any other natural ecosystem is a masterpiece of evolution, exquisitely well adapted to the environment it inhabits. The fauna and flora of the world are, moreover, the cradle of humanity, to which we, no less than the rest of life, are closely adapted in our physical and psychological needs. Each species and its descendant species live, very roughly, a million years before suffering natural extinction. Worldwide, habitat destruction combined with the other three of the four horsemen of environmental ruin -- invasive species, pollution and unsustainable logging -- have increased the rate of extinction by as much as a thousandfold, thereby shortening the average life spans of species by the same amount.

At least 1 percent of America's native plant and animal species has vanished, mostly during the past century, and a third are classified as vulnerable or endangered. Most native species, including those still relatively safe, have undergone large reductions in abundance, geographic range and, most likely, genetic diversity. Much of this loss is due to the replacement of biologically rich natural forests with tree farms. From the standpoint of species diversity and resilience, these cultivated woody crops rank as no more than cornfields. While tree farms can easily be expanded on private lands, national forests -- the

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reservoirs of much of our nation's biological diversity -- cannot. The euphemism used by the Bush administration and the timber industry to help justify this practice, the Healthy Forests Initiative, does no justice to the broad needs of the United States.

America's national forests are the common property of its citizens. They are a public trust of incalculable value. They should be freed from commercial logging altogether and cut only very locally and in extreme cases when it is deemed ecologically necessary to return native species or reduce hazardous fires near homes and communities. The time has come to free national forests from political partisanship and use their treasures to benefit all Americans, now and for generations to come.

The writer is university research professor emeritus at Harvard.

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