

Conservation for a New Century

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Remarks of Forest Service Chief Mike Dombeck Building on Leopold's Vision:
<http://www.fs.fed.us/intro/speech/19991007.html>

Visionary is a much-overused word. Most of us like to think of ourselves as visionaries. A visionary is able to look beyond life's urgent press of immediate business and focus on the truly long-term important things. Few single words lend themselves with more ease to the life and work of Aldo Leopold. Whether the issue was his evolving understanding of the role of large predators such as wolves, the importance of education, the imperative of wilderness, or extending a land ethic to economic and social issues, Leopold charted a course and defined a legacy that we struggle to measure up to more than half a century later.

Mindful of Leopold's ability to separate the important from the urgent, I challenge Forest Service personnel and others to get beyond the controversy du jour and to ask "what is it society will want from - value most about - the Forest Service in 50 years?" This is at root, a question of values. And frankly, discussions of values are difficult. So often, we cloak our discussions of the need for more wild places, old growth, ecologically sustainable timber harvest, and unfragmented landscapes, in thick Environmental Impact Statements that read as though a biologist were mimicking a patent lawyer.

If we have learned anything over the past decade, however, it's that difficult, value-laden issues don't become easier with neglect. They snowball out of control into courtrooms across the country. So, I'd like to talk for a few minutes about some important value-laden issues that I hope we can respond to with vision.

Consumption and Restoration

Everyone here should be well aware that timber harvest off National Forests has declined by about 70% -- from 12 billion board feet in the late 1980s to about 3.4 billion board feet today. Make no mistake. Although we did what was expected of us at the time, we were

cutting too many trees for too long and it resulted in injunctions that led to public distrust and social and economic uncertainty. These facts lend context to what I want to say next.

Not long ago, an environmentalist colleague told me, "we'll be satisfied once we get the National Forest timber harvest down to about two billion board feet per year." Had he been asked a decade ago what the harvest level should be, he'd likely have said nine or seven or maybe even five billion board feet per year. But 3.4? No way.

Similarly, a decade ago, the timber industry likely could have settled for legislation that would have reduced harvest in the Pacific Northwest from five billion board feet to two or three. Both proposals were summarily rejected. Today, we harvest about one billion board feet.

These two examples speak to the dilemma we find ourselves in today. The debate over forest management continues to be driven by outdated models from a bygone era. We should be talking about the condition we want on the land. We should be talking about what we leave rather than what we take. The effect of applying yesterday's debate to a new era can have insidious effects.

- It can perpetuate distrust and division.
- It can stifle dialogue and consensus.
- It can compromise our ability to exert leadership on difficult conservation issues.

Changes in National Forest management in the past decade or more demonstrate the agency's reinvigorated commitment to ecosystem management and collaborative stewardship. What's missing, however, is the recognition that in the absence of a national consumption ethic, our land ethic only shifts our environmental problems to other lands governed by more lenient environmental protections.

For example, demand for the 8-9 billion board feet formerly harvested from National

Forests did not disappear. It simply shifted to other places. Consider:

- The average size of homes in the U.S. grew from 1,520 square feet in 1971 to 2,120 square feet in 1996. Meanwhile family sizes have grown smaller.
- Between 1991 and 1996, U.S. softwood imports from Canada rose from 10.5 to nearly 18 billion board feet per year placing additional pressure on the old growth boreal ecosystems of northern Quebec.
- The harvest of softwood timber in the southeastern United States today exceeds the rate of growth for the first time in at least 50 years.

My point is that we rarely talk about these important - crucial - issues such as consumption. We are so busy highlighting our differences that it steals our ability to see that there are so many important conservation issues that truly need our collective and shared energy.

The Forest Service has served as a world leader in some of these crucial areas. For example, the technology and innovation in the fields of recycling, efficiency, and wood utilization developed by Forest Service Research have helped to double the amount of wood fiber that is usable from a single log.

As a nation we have already made great strides. For example, 40% of the paper we use is recycled. The challenge is to put the other 60% back into productive use. I envision a future where homes are more recyclable, where walls can be easily moved to accommodate a growing or shrinking family and where wood products from one building can be readily exchanged into another. Technologies such as the wood truss frame system, panelized construction and stress skin panel construction and other innovations developed here in Madison at the Forest Products Lab have already been demonstrated.

I envision a future where the wood removed from pallets and from building demolition projects is not sent to the landfill, but turned into useable products such as particleboard for furniture.

I envision a future where the 40 million acres of National Forest that are overstocked

in many cases with off-site species due to past management practices and fire suppression are treated to restore watershed function and integrity. Equally important, we could use that small diameter material to develop value-added products that may substitute for traditional lumber and help reduce our reliance on wood imports. We must conserve this nation's forests without exporting environmental problems to other countries.

It is unlikely we will ever again see timber harvest levels of a decade ago taken from our public forests. Nor should we. Yet, we must be willing to slow our consumption rates of natural resources if our land ethic can extend over state lines and through private boundaries, and finally to other nation's of the world.

Related to the issue of consumption is our own national commitment to conservation and restoration - what Aldo Leopold called the land ethic. Few generations of Americans have enjoyed the wealth and prosperity we take for granted today. Our challenge is to ensure that we make the necessary investments in maintaining and restoring our environmental capital so that it will continue to pay dividends for generations to come. Unfortunately, federal spending on natural resources and the environment as a percent of total domestic spending is half of what it was in 1962.

In spite of this, we at the Forest Service continue to develop policies to address our most pressing challenges.

- The interim suspension of road construction in roadless areas on National Forests makes clear the significance that we place on these last remaining wild places.
- The newly released draft planning regulations provide a broad collaborative framework where we can use the best available science to protect the ecological sustainability of the land and by doing so help ensure that the land will sustain us for generations to come. We need to ensure that our land management plans have enough flexibility so they may be adapted to reflect new information and changing conditions.
- The soon to be released draft road policy will help us to ensure that in 50 years we are not

left with a series of high elevation roadless areas completely severed from the more biologically productive and fertile valley bottoms and mainstem rivers.

A policy framework, without popular support and national investment is of little use on the "landscape of the back 40," as Leopold would have said.

The environmental movement was founded on a collective sense of shared need. The need to work together to improve the health of our lands and waters, the safety of our workplaces, the quality of our lives. When I think of our environmental leaders of the future, I am sometimes worried that they may lose their focus on the need to educate, to serve, to work together to achieve sustainability and a better social condition.

It is so seductive to focus on our differences rather than the values we share - to choose the sexy over the substantive. Although they are hard words, perhaps we need to pause for just a moment and remember what the writer Barry Lopez advised, in an essay aptly titled, *Waiting on Wisdom*:

If our concerns remain who "wins" in these disagreements? twenty years from now? we will be seen as a people who, in a moment that called for discerning intelligence, settled for a fight over control, a venal and pedestrian aspiration.

Off -Highway Vehicles

In the interest of walking the talk, I'd like to take a few moments to address directly an issue of national significance that would be far easier to avoid - off highway vehicles.

Off highway vehicles are a legitimate use of most National Forests and Grasslands. They are, in fact, the only way many people can realistically enjoy our public lands. As baby-boomers age and society continues to urbanize, more and more people may turn to off road vehicles as their primary way of enjoying the great outdoors.

This growth in use carries with it potential for conflicts with others and conflicts with resource management. New and less expensive technology allows people to get to areas previously unreachable to motorized

vehicles of National Forests and Grasslands. In the process, unplanned and unauthorized roads and trails may be created, sensitive wildlife habitat disrupted, erosion accelerated, and water quality degraded.

Driving for pleasure is a great American past time. More and more Americans are using forest roads to enjoy their public lands. And this is as it should be - National Forests and Grasslands are a birthright and every citizen should enjoy their presence, value, and multiple benefits. National Forests offer people from every walk of life 192 million acres of open land - without a single "No Trespassing" sign. What an incredible legacy!

Yet, we must also be mindful of writer T.H. Watkins' admonition, "in natural regions, as in public libraries, we should not be allowed to do everything we can merely because we can do it." As with all other uses of the National Forest System, our responsibility is to ensure that no single use compromises the basic integrity of the public's soil, water, and biological resources.

Our long-term road policy will help us to provide managers with new analytical tools, and to better inform decisions about decommissioning, converting to trails, upgrading, and building new roads. It will also provide us with a forum through which we may work with communities of place and communities of interest to make site-specific decisions about individual roads and trails and other motorized recreation.

Our objective is to use open and public processes to provide for safe and efficient use of National Forests in a manner that does not compromise the ecological sustainability of the lands and waters entrusted to our care. We must ensure that off highway vehicle use will be managed to protect forest resources, promote safe access, and minimize conflicts among the various users of the forests.

My intention today is to outline principled guidance that existing law, regulations, and most important common sense suggests we follow. For example:

- Use of the National Forest System is by definition a public issue. Off road vehicle use decisions will be made through an open and public process unless there is justifiable need

for immediate action to protect forest resources or public safety.

- Where unauthorized roads and trails are an issue, our management should reflect the general policy that motorized use occurs on designated routes and areas. In no way should we condone the de facto development of unplanned or unauthorized trails and roads. This places a special burden on the Forest Service to ensure that roads and motorized trails are adequately signed, mapped, and marked for public use and enjoyment.
- Any decision to make currently unauthorized roads and trails a part of the authorized forest road and transportation system, will be made through open and public processes.
- Any maintenance or reconstruction of authorized forest roads that would change either levels or types of use will also be made through an open and public process. For example, expanding an all terrain vehicle trail to one accessible to a four-wheel drive truck through maintenance or reconstruction could change levels and types of use. Forests should monitor off road vehicle use to ensure public safety and prevent environmental degradation.

I invite communities of place and communities of interest to begin a dialogue. This issue will not get easier with neglect. We need the help of off road vehicle constituencies, state, local, and tribal

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governments, the conservation community, and all other who use and care about the land. Our challenge is to develop new partnerships, leverage new resources, and work together so that those who enjoy our forests using off highway vehicles may recreate and those that prefer the solitude and silence may enjoy high quality experiences as well.

Conclusion

I think about how one man, Aldo Leopold, shaped the past 50 years of conservation and wonder. Leopold lived his life and, as we have learned this week, raised his children, as "plain and simple members of the land community." What an incredible understatement, such incredible humility! I look across the room and see so many people whose lives were directly or indirectly touched, influenced, or instructed by Aldo Leopold or one of his children. My own mentor in college, Dr. George Becker, eminent author of *The Fishes of Wisconsin*, took Leopold's wildlife management course here at the University of Wisconsin in 1939.

I hope we can leave here today with the shared goal that in the coming 50 years our children's children will celebrate those leaders who in an era that demanded tough choices, chose integrity over expediency; long-term values over short-term profit; the important over the immediate and urgent.