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Reshaping Society's Relationship with Nature

The Forest Products Industry in Public Education

By WILLIAM WILLERS

"As we liquidate ancient forests we are redesigning the world and simultaneously throwing away Nature's blueprint."

-Chris Maser

When nature is defined exclusively as "resource", intrinsic value evaporates. "Worth" becomes understood strictly in terms of usefulness and economy, so that any right of wild nature to prevail on its own terms ends. No longer "our true home", as described by Edward Abbey, nature depicted predominately as commercial engine isolates humanity from the rest of creation.

No industry has had greater influence on society's understanding of nature than the forest products industry, which, by reshaping the concept of "forest", distorts understanding of the larger natural world itself. This industry fosters educational programs that, by downplaying identification with wild nature, by emphasizing the utilitarian, and by training the public to accept relatively biologically sterile plantations as "forests", erode society's respect for the splendor of unmanaged nature and for its right to exist. The apparent aim is to extinguish the awe for the opulence of wildness that comes so naturally to the young and to replace it with a commodity-oriented value system. As is invariably the case for projects created, funded and marketed by a profit-driven industry, the aim is not the public interest but the industry's bottom line. This should surprise no well-informed adult in the 21st Century.

Some professional societies such as the Ecological Society of America (http://www.esa.org/), the American Institute of Biological Sciences (http://www.aibs.org/) and the Society for Conservation Biology (http://www.conbio.org/) have education programs, but they are eclipsed into virtual invisibility by the aggressive promotion in which the corporate sector, with its unlimited finances, excels. In truth, the forest products industry has long been a dominant information source for the nation's young people regarding forests in particular and nature in general.

Forest Ecology vs. Industrial Forest Science

"Wealth and the prospect of wealth generates political and social power that is used to promote unlimited exploitation of resources; …Scientists and their judgments are subject to political pressure; …The larger and more immediate the prospects for gain, the greater the political power that is used to facilitate unlimited exploitation; …Distrust claims of sustainability."

– Ludwig, et al, 1993. Science, Vol. 60.

In 1988, physicist Fritjof Capra differentiated between "science for understanding … enlightenment and liberation" and "science for manipulation [and] power", his point

being that "Western civilization is based on the philosophical error that manipulative science is the truth". Capra's distinction separates independent forest ecology from the forest science that is servant to industry. The former seeks to fathom the complexities of intact native "old growth" forest ecosystems in their nearly unimaginably lush diversity, while the latter is concerned with maximizing the biomass that the tree component alone offers industry in its pursuit of lumber and paper pulp.

While trees, even as dead "snags" and rotting logs, offer framework and habitat for a forest community, they account for a small minority of the thousands of plant and animal species in large-scale old growth or "ancient" forest ecosystems. For industry, however, such ancient forests are inefficient. It is therefore cost-effective to prevent their redevelopment, which takes centuries, and to replace them with short-lived aspen or plantations of other commercially valuable trees, to be "harvested" when youthful growth rates slow. Such "management", rather like slow-motion lawn mowing on gargantuan scale, has provoked the derisive epithet "fiber farm" from critics.

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with raising trees for lumber, the corporate imperative to maximize profits demands everything, so that nothing, including public forest, is to be spared industrial management. This was stated succinctly in a 1990s, industry-backed study to determine the future of forests in Minnesota: "Conservationists [cannot be] naïve about the reality of world markets and demand for forest products; … [We intend] to identify mitigation actions which are effective and practical in a physical context, as well as in the political, financial, and administrative environments in Minnesota; … No forest would be reserved from harvest".

This four-year study, for which Minnesota taxpayers paid $900,000, became a snapshot of how forest science serves industrial interests along a similar ethical path as, say, science within the tobacco industry. In the biodiversity section of the draft, for example, authors recommended clearcuts of over 10,000 acres (If in a square, that would be roughly four miles on a side), claiming that such massive clearcuts "mimic natural catastrophe", such as fire or wind damage. This was no mistake but a calculated lie, as any competent ecologist should know. Nevertheless, no forest scientist in Minnesota, whether with the U.S. Forest Service, the state Division of Forestry, an academic department of forestry, or in private practice stated publicly the obvious: that the assertion was a glaring lie.

The failure to sustain controls of large-scale native old growth forest is a critical flaw of industrial forest science. Scientific methodology requires that if one experiments on anything, a body or situation similar in quality and scale is to be held aside as a "control" to serve as a standard against which to compare results. Forest scientists routinely experiment on a few acres, with control of a few acres, and then extrapolate to entire landscapes as if scale were of no consequence. This has immense implications, for large, self-regulating old growth forests embracing full complements of native species contain information – nature's "blueprints", as it were – that are scarcely understood and that are lost when replaced by managed environments and disconnected fragments. The great 20th Century biologist, Aldo Leopold, put it succinctly in 1941: "A science of land health needs, first of all, a base datum of normality, a picture of how healthy land maintains itself as an organism; … Each biotic province needs its own wilderness for comparative studies of used and unused land." Leopold's "base datum of normality" is another expression of "scientific control".

Science yields answers only to questions asked. When the questions posed by industrial forest science can be seen as variants of the single question "How much biomass, whether lumber or pulp, can we wrest from the land over time?", we see an example of Capra's "science for manipulation and power".

Teaching Teachers

”[O]nce we accept life within a technically mediated reality, we become less aware of anything that preceded it; …With each new generation of technology, and with each stage of technological expansion into pristine environments, human beings have fewer alternatives and become more deeply immersed within technological consciousness.”

- Jerry Mander, “In The Absence of the Sacred”

When considering educational materials from any industry, teachers need to think critically, for such materials employ a mass psychology in which the advertising and public relations sectors, as servants of industry, are expert. In 2000, for example, there appeared a series of lesson plans titled “Learning From the Forest” that advanced commercial interests. For example, a game titled “Forest Dilemmas”, proposed for grades 6-12, included the following cards:

“Endangered species found on your land. Lose 5 years while you deal with federal agencies on critical habitat issues.”

“A new law limits logging on federal lands. Lose $250,000 due to loss of federal limber sales you were counting on to provide wood for your mill.”

“Up for re-election this year, your ‘environmental senator’ [sic] convinces you to delay a controversial harvest until next year. You lose $10,000.”

In the area of positive reinforcement there was a card reading “Due to your intensive forest management your forest is HEALTHY! [sic]. Gain two years due to rapidly growing trees (You may eliminate an unhealthy card with this card. Return it to the deck)”.

The lessons were allegedly created by teachers who had attended an industrial workshop sponsored by the Idaho Forest Products Commission and the University of Idaho. While it is personally uncomfortable to criticize the academic world in which I spent my professional life, there is no question that the forest products industry is a powerful and lucrative presence within it all across the nation.

As to the University of Idaho, which had hosted the industrial workshop mentioned, a letter sent in 2002 to the President of the University included the following paragraphs:

“Within the community of independent biologists it is understood that the loss of biological diversity is one of the most crucial issues of our time. The Endangered Species Act, designed to stem that loss, is under unrelenting attack by extractive industries, since it may interfere with profits. At the same time, the “intensive management” referred to, because it seeks to maximize output of biomass, transforms complex forest ecosystems into vastly simpler situations. And while one might wish to manage one’s own land as a tree farm, surely you cannot be unaware that such use of the public’s land by a powerful extractive industry has long since become a major conflict pitting industry against an array of citizen groups across the nation.

“The tactics of the multi-billion dollar forest products industry are no different than those of the multi-billion dollar tobacco industry. Indeed, they employ the same “green-washing” public relations industry. The use, however, of a public institution of higher education as an industrial mouthpiece, as if it were a Madison Avenue advertising firm, is improper and a gross distortion of education at any level.”

The letter went unanswered.

Getting To Kids Early

"In the early 1970s, the forest products industry recognized the need for a balanced resource program for the nation's schools." -Project Learning Tree literature

Project Learning Tree (PLT), a project of the American Forest Foundation (AFF) is the recipient of an award from the National Association for Industry-Education Cooperation and the best known of the industry's education programs. (http://www.plt.org/). PLT claims to have reached 26 million students in the U.S and abroad and trained half a million teachers.

The mission of AFF "… to ensure the sustainability of America's family forests for present and future generations" reveals its industrial focus, for family forests are typically managed for commercial yield (Note: The American Tree Farm System is also a project of AFF). Herein lies the rub, for the cultivated situations advanced by the AFF are, biologically, no more comparable to old growth forests than cornfields are to wild tall-grass prairies. Nor is AFF secret about its goal of "… a public which understands and values the social, economic, and environmental benefits [forests] provide to our communities, our nation, and the world." (See http://www.forestfoundation.org/partners.html)

In keeping with its parent organization, PLT "… covers the topics of Environment, Resource Management & Technology, and Society & Culture. The conceptual framework serves as the basis for the development of all of PLT's curriculum materials." Such melding of forestry with technology, economics, consumer products, job creation and "social systems" is the hallmark of "education" backed by this industry. Wild native old growth forests are counter to its interests, and it has historically used every political, financial, PR/advertising and educational force available to fight against their protection or reestablishment. It is simply bottom-line decision making.

Here, from its own literature over the years, some of PLT's commentary:

"[T]eachers appreciate having a wealth of free resources at hand without having to search for them; … PLT provides ready-made lessons and activities that can be incorporated into busy classroom schedules [and] infused into science, language arts, social studies, reading, arithmetic, art, music, civics, etc.; …Branch [a PLT publication] is designed to help students … examine beliefs and values related to forests and clarify their thoughts about how forest resources can be managed; … [T]hrough PLT, young people can … describe all the many roles wood and paper products play in our lives [and] how a forester works to manage forest resources."

While PLT claims to teach children "how to think, not what to think", it concentrates on what to think about – forests as sources of commercial products. Even in quizzes the agricultural/managerial ethic is stressed: "True-False. 'In the past decade, more than 50 trees have been planted for each Minnesotan'. Answer 'True' ". The role of trees as an economic engine is continually stressed: "To the state economy [forests] represent almost $6 billion each year; …Tough compromises are sometimes necessary; …The science of managing [forests] wisely becomes more important than ever…"

On Wisconsin: "LEAF"

"A forest does not take care of itself. It needs to be managed;… Professional loggers are really the stewards of our forests and timberlands in Wisconsin."

-Lobbyist Gene Francisco

In Wisconsin, the forest products industry is a powerful and controlling presence in all sectors of society. In an astonishingly brazen government-to-industry "revolving door" move, the head of the state Division of Forestry, Gene Francisco, retired in 2002 to become director of the Wisconsin Professional Logger's Association. In the wake of this shift from public servant to industry's most powerful lobbyist, there emerged a new K-12 forestry education program, Learning, Experiences & Activities in Forestry ("LEAF"), introduced "with special thanks to Gene Francisco" and headquartered at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point. (http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr/leaf/educators/calendar.shtml and other Internet sites)

LEAF certainly is about forestry rather than forests per se. Having perused the six volumes of LEAF's lesson guides and its videos, I consider it a strategy to suppress passion for the natural world and to inculcate primarily commercial values. Its approach, in a nutshell, might best be described by a video for grades 9-12, introduced in a young woman's voice as follows:

"When we think of forests we usually see them as wilderness places, natural environments that shouldn't be changed by human activities." (A hand is shown pulling a natural woodland scene away, and there stands a high school-aged woman. She continues …) "In fact, we might be pretty upset if someone were to disturb or destroy such a beautiful place. But what we might not think of are the products from the forest that we use, like this paper, or lumber and wood to build our homes and thousands of products for work and play that come from trees." (Scene cuts to the young woman in hard hat and with lumber in hand – then, as she continues discussing "forests", and does a little dance while strumming a guitar, there is pictured behind her a plantation of rows of even-aged pine trees. Her voice continues …) "In this program we will be looking at several major issues linked to our relationship with forests. The first issue is the question of how to maintain a balance between preserving the forest as a natural environment and using this resource to make products. Then we'll take a detailed look at one special product made from trees …" (The scene then shifts from plantation to veneer factory.)

So it goes in a state in which the Governor's Council on Forestry is a collective of industrialists chaired by a vice president of Stora Enso, a forest products corporation of global reach.

Item: A petition by more than 200 independent academic biologists in 17 Wisconsin college and university campuses to make maintaining native biological diversity the primary goal of management of state public forests is thwarted by industry.

Item: A biological survey of a Wisconsin state forest reveals that 71% of its tree-covered area is managed as aspen or pine plantation.

Item: A request by independent biologists at the University of Wisconsin to return two 50,000-acre tracts of national forest to native old-growth conditions is defeated by industry.

Item: Industry-backed politicians press for legislation making it illegal for a citizen or group to interfere with any "generally-accepted forest management practice".

And nobody blinks. Media are either uninterested or muzzled, so these are not "news". And while I am most familiar with conditions in my Upper Midwest Region, I look about the country and see similar situations everywhere trees grow.

There is an unimaginably dense meshwork of personal, financial and political relationships between the forest products industry, on the one hand, and federal and

state environmental education ("EE") groups, media including "public" airways, academic departments of forestry (regardless of how they may have wordsmithed their titles), legislatures and various governmental bureaus. Tendrils lead from virtually all points either directly or indirectly into the corporate complex that is the forest products industry.

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