

FROM OMNIPOTENCE TO OMNIPRESENCE

THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN FORESTER

The roots of the practice of forestry of America are firmly implanted in Pisgah Forest, North Carolina, right here in the Appalachian Section (now Society) of the SAF. In the late 1800's as George Vanderbilt was building his historic Biltmore Estate, his landscape architect—the renowned Frederick Law Olmstead whose list of achievements included the design of Central Park in New York City—suggested a big vision for the estate by purchasing entire watersheds surrounding Mt. Pisgah. To manage these woodlands, Olmstead recommended hiring a professional forester. As yet, there were no forestry schools in the United States, but there was a son of a prominent Pennsylvania family who had recently matriculated from the forestry curriculum at Nancy, France. Gifford Pinchot was hired to manage the estate's forests, and was succeeded by Carl Alwin Schenck of Germany who soon established the Biltmore School of Forestry in 1898. The rest is history

Events moved quickly at the turn of the 20th Century. Soon after the launch of the two year Biltmore curriculum, Cornell University opened a four year forestry program under the leadership of B.E. Fernow—a German immigrant widely recognized as the first professional forester in America. That short-lived curriculum foundered within a decade upon the rocks of public criticism because, of all things, the practice of clearcutting the school's donated forest lands in the Adirondacks. The foresters were adamant—read that “omnipotent” —and so was the legislature. Guess who won. It would be more that a decade before New York would fund college level forestry education, and this time at Syracuse University, not Cornell. Perhaps it was an institution more sensitive to the judgment of an elected legislature.

In 1900 the Pinchot family endowed the two year post graduate program in forestry at Yale University and in that same year Gifford Pinchot himself hosted the founding of our own Society of American Foresters. In the first decade of the 20th Century, President Teddy Roosevelt launched a number of initiatives which institutionalized the nascent Conservation Movement. He named Pinchot as the first Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, and transferred the public domain lands designated as Forest Reserves from the Department of the Interior to the Department of Agriculture to become known as National Forests.

With the passage of the Weeks Act in 1911, after years of contention and Congressional wrangling (which might have given us a clue as to what would happen a scant 50 years later with the emergence of the strident Environmental Movement supplanting the popular Conservation Movement) the Forest Service began purchasing cutover land in the eastern United States with the twin objectives of protecting watersheds and what today we would come to call a sustainable wood supply for American enterprise. There is a bit of irony here—100 years later—many fear we are doing neither, at least on our National Forestsbut that is another story.

The first tract purchased was near Old Fort, N.C., to be followed not many years later with the purchase of all but 5,000 acres of the extensive—and recently logged—Pisgah Forest holdings from the financially distressed Vanderbilt estate. They are now the core of the Pisgah Ranger District.

With the passage of the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act of 1960, Congress followed the advice of foresters and declared that henceforth National Forests were to be managed with multiple objectives—the five W's—of Wood, Water, Wildlife, Range, and Recreation. Professional foresters, who since the inception of the agency had dominated the leadership of the U.S. Forest Service, now had clear legislative direction to manage these five disciplines.

Recognizing the importance of this mandate, Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman from Minnesota directed the agency to create a memorial to the birth of forestry in America at the site of the Biltmore Forestry School field campus in a high Appalachian valley known as the Pink Beds. In 1962 it was my

honor to be selected the project leader to conduct the historical research and develop the master plan of what we know today as the Cradle of Forestry in America.

Soon after the passage of the Multiple Use Act a professor of forestry at the University of Montana coined the phrase “Succotash Syndrome” to describe the management directives of the agency and its initiative-robbing National Forest Manual. In 1966 he really got with the beat when the Journal of Forestry published his in-depth analysis of the forestry profession, including its ideology and biases, in June of 1966.

THE MYTH OF THE OMNIPOTENT FORESTER

Titled “The Myth of the Omnipotent Forester,” Professor Behan’s treatise soon became a staple of Forest Policy curricula. This excellent article is now posted on the APSAF website. He recalled a statement delivered to students in one of his classes by a visiting “forester of considerable professional status” who said: “We must have the enough guts to stand up and tell the public how their land should be managed. As professional foresters, we know what’s best for the land.”

Behan went on to say: “An outgrowth of the Myth, implicit in the professional forester’s statement above, is that politics and pressure groups are institutions clearly alien to the practice of good forestry. We feel frequently we could be much more effective in our effort to ‘intensify management’ if only the pressure groups would leave us alone.....since we as foresters ‘know what’s best for the land’ we are in the best position to determine that greater public interest.”

[SIDEBAR—WHAT IS IN THE WORD: “FORESTRY?"] A decade later I had the opportunity to serve with Behan as a fellow director of the then American Forestry Association, historically the nation’s guiding force in forest policy. It is now known simply as American Forests, a name change thought to be a stronger market concept in the 21st century. Eight years after AFA dropped Forestry from its name, we merged the three programs of the existing National Forestry

Network into the National Forestry Association—“forestry is our middle name.” We even added a subtitle: “Because Good Forestry Matters.” We were not about to give up that word! The organization of the NFA and its forest practice certification program: Green Tag Forestry, debuted at the annual meeting of the SAF in 1996 at Albuquerque, New Mexico, the city of white oaks, *Quercus alba*.]

Behan was not alone in his concern for the forestry profession. Just three years earlier a personage no less than the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, writing again in the Journal of Forestry, observed that our profession was “not fully attuned to the external forces,” and that “We must redouble our efforts to regain our share of leadership in natural resources conservation.”

The idea that “foresters, not politicians, should make the vital decisions in regards to forests” has deep roots within our proud profession. Indeed, on this very bully pulpit of the Appalachian Society of American Foresters we heard this sentiment expressed with deep conviction for decades, especially in the ‘60s and ‘70s, as the Environmental Movement was finding its political sea legs.

As a junior faculty member and PhD candidate at the N.C. State School of Forest Resources—a newly adopted name to represent an academic interest beyond the sphere of just trees—I determined that the degree would be in political science, with a committee not seen before by the forest faculty--nor maybe ever again.

At my urging, and with the title “forestry” newly available, we changed the name of the Department of Forest Management to the Department of Forestry, reflecting the fact we taught courses in environmental conservation, recreation, and watershed management. Concerned over the possibility of a possible backlash, from who knows where [which is how the political system works] we placed new decals with the moniker: School of Forest Resources, N.C. State University on our small truck fleet used for teaching and research. I am encouraged by the fact when the School evolved into a College of Natural Resources, the Department of Forestry became Forestry & Environ. Science.

FROM OMNIPOTENCE TO IMPOTENCE

In September, 2006 another professor, Martin Luckert of the Department of Rural Economy at the University of Alberta, again raised the specter in a refereed Social Science article in the Journal of Forestry titled: “Has the Myth of the Omnipotent Forester Become the Reality of the Impotent Forester?” In assessing the possible future of forestry he boldly speculated on whether our performance is likely to “promote importance or impotence of the profession.” Luckert’s analogy aroused a flurry of indignation and dismay from many of our colleagues. It also stirred some thoughtful interest, expressed again yet today by the planners of this morning’s program.

Luckert reiterated Behan’s observation that rigid Prussian forestry concepts did not fit well in the United States..... “we imported a professional ethic inconsistent with our sociology and an attitude inconsistent with our politics, which denied professional arbitration.” This inconsistency was lost in the idealism and simplicity of the forestry crusade. Luckert goes on to discuss some of the signs of trouble and possible causes that could accelerate either a decline or resurgence of the forestry profession. Let’s look at these:

SIGNS OF TROUBLE

1). Declining number of foresters investing in professional societies. In 2003 past SAF President Jim Coufal noted that in the previous decade membership had dropped 30%. Our Society has worked hard to stem that decline, by opening membership to technicians and allied disciplines. The Canadian Institute of Forestry reported a slight gain, because of both enlarging their eligibility criteria as well as more prevalence of laws requiring the hiring of trained and registered professional foresters.

2). Declining enrollments in forestry schools, both in the U.S. and Canada. In 2003, Sharik reported a drop in enrollment in 24 universities in the U.S. from 3,500 in 1996 to 2,000 students six years later. Luckert himself reported a drop of about one third in Canada. Fortunately these trends have

reversed in recent years, possibly as more programs add “environmental science” to their name as N.C. State, Duke, and Yale have done.

3). Declining forestry jobs. We all know that to be true, especially those jobs as directly linked to timber harvest and management. But wood is still our most valuable, evergrowing, renewable natural resource. As a source of cellulosic energy alone, its potential is huge. Those jobs, and more, will be back in many forms and allied disciplines.....read that ONMIPRESENCE.

RESPONSES TO THESE PROBLEMS

Luckert writes that “The forestry profession...had responded to these issue in a number of ways”including increased policy efforts by the SAF and the CIF. In Washington DC the SAF is a respected and influential force, and has been for years. The SAF has repeatedly appointed special Task Force groups to investigate and report in-depth complex, and often contentious issues including habitat for Spotted owls, clearcutting on the National Forests, forest certification, genetic modification, damage caused by unrestricted use of ORVs, sale of National Forest land to reduce the federal budget deficit, and many more.

Several of you in this room served on these important team efforts, and I know more of you will respond to the call in the future when asked. I, myself served on four: ORV policy, forest certification, sale of National Forest land as requested by President Reagan, and a response to the Monongahela National Forest lawsuit and decision which temporally halted timber sales on many eastern forests and laid the foundation to the National Forest Management Act of 1976. I had the honor to serve as chair of those last two.

ACCREDITATION, PROFESSIONAL LICENSING OF FORESTERS, AND ETHICS

Luckert devotes much of his discussion to a review of these three important issues. On the issue of Ethics, the SAF has a long and responsible position. Moreover, we periodically revisit and update our code to reflect changing values and laws. Our most recent code was adopted in 2003, after years of investigation and sometimes emotional debate.

Accreditation of forestry education it intended to enhance the creditability of the forestry profession. The SAF has done this very well for a long time, and all four forestry curricula within our Section are accredited. But this is a continually evolving program to be revisited periodically. Some well respected university programs have withdrawn, and we need to understand why. Maybe we can respond, and maybe we shouldn't. May God bless those tasked with that effort, for it can be a formidable one.

Discussion of the professional licensing of foresters is no stranger to the Appalachian SAF. When I first arrived in the Carolinas in 1963 and learned that South Carolina had a voluntary Registration of Professional Foresters program I quickly applied and was designated Registered Forester #400. I proudly kept that registration for decades, in the firm belief it was the right thing to do. If nothing else, this registration documented my right to call myself a forester, a surprising contentious issue we came to find out. I was confident that one day I could be registered here in Virginia.

In 1975 North Carolina created a voluntary registration of foresters. That law was upgraded with continuing education requirements (much like our own Certified Forester designation), and became mandatory in 1998. Still, there was a public desire create a law to license foresters to practice forestry, similar to a California law requiring the signature of a Registered Professional Forester approving a detailed logging plan before private woodland owners can cut their own trees. Such a law is an expression of the public interest in sustainable forestry, and its multiple benefits to society through wildlife habitat, clean water and air, and not the least: wood. NATIONAL WOODLANDS Magazine proclaims as part of the masthead: "Growing half of America's wood, forests, water and wildlife."

The licensing of the practice of forestry on private lands is no doubt an appealing idea to those who distrust our motives as foresters and landowners, but as of yet it is not yet ripe for consensus. Last fall the Board of the North Carolina Forestry Association, after much study, voted that "while

improvements to the existing law are warranted, the licensing of the practice of forestry is not.”

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

To avoid the pitfall of becoming less than relevant, a more politic phrase of impotence, Luckert gives five suggestions:

1). **Do Not Manage only for “the Good of the Land.”** This means that “foresters can not be guardians of forests according to some universal management principal, but instead....respond to changing social forces.” In 1966 Behan observed “There will be few, if any, real cases of human welfare requiring what’s bad for the land: a comforting thought.” He might not be willing to make that statement today, **UNLESS** you and I and those like us are successful in becoming integrated throughout the growing societal structure of stewardship. Once again: read that “omnipresence.”

2). **Never Say or Think, “Trust Me Folks, I’m a Professional.”** Instead of maximizing the theoretically productive capacity of every resource: wood, water, habitat and natural beauty, it is important for foresters to give their best effort to manage for the benefit of society as well as the explicit or implicit direction of our employers. That concept is more relevant in Canada where the forest resource is, by far, publicly owned. Here in the United States, more than two thirds is privately owned, tax-paying land, the highest percentage of any major nation. About half of our woodlands are family owned. With the recent advent of divestiture of industrial forestlands, 10 to 25 acre parcels are the fastest growing class of ownership already approaching 10 million family forest landowners. That makes our forest stewardship much more complex.

Remember the adage: “He who pays says.” Forget that and you may become unemployed!

3). Do not Assume Foresters Can Manage Forests on Their Own.

As society pays more attention to the value of forest ecosystems, it has involved an array of disciplines including ecology, botany, hydrology, agronomy, political science, history and more. Fill in a wetland, and you'll soon hear about it. Bulldoze a sacred or historic site, and you'll wish you hadn't. We need to work with them, and we can do that best when we involve ourselves, with our employer's blessing, with their specialties and concerns. Once again: read that "Omnipresence."

4). Do Not Assume The Foresters Can Legislate or Certify Professionalism to Regain Stature.

Luckert asserts that "Professional stature is earned when society deems that it is receiving a service worthy of its praise. It can not be granted to the profession by the profession whether it is legislated or certified." On this point I believe he has underestimated the strength of member commitment to a professional association like ours. Certification is important, which is why I carry CF on my business cards and signature block. The Association of Consulting Foresters recognized the importance of certified specialization in forestry for landowners and I would think that most of the consultants here today proudly display ACF behind their name.

Legislation to license professional competence? That is a slippery slope. Voters in some states may implement that, as they have in California. I would suggest that how regulated we are by society is a direct result of the level of confidence people have in our ability to be responsible stewards, including our persuasive ability to convince our clients, most often private landowners, to do the right thing.

5). Do Not Assume That Ethics Will Improve Forest Management.

Ethics alone won't, but how well we apply those ethics certain will. When Luckert wrote this item he may not have fully grasped the power of the

Principles and Pledges of our latest SAF Code of Ethics:

- 1. Foresters have a responsibility to manage land for both current and future generations.**
- 2. Society must respect forest landowners' rights and correspondingly, landowners have a land stewardship responsibility to society. [This same tenet was written into the National Woodland Owners Woodland Responsibility Code written in 1986 and later adopted by 26 of our affiliated state landowner associations.**
- 3. Sound science in the foundation of the forestry profession.**
- 4. Public policy related to forests must be based on both scientific principles and societal values.**
- 5. Honest and open communication, coupled with respect for information given in confidence, is essential to good service.**
- 6. Professional and civic behavior must be based on honest, fairness, good will, and respect for the law.**

Follow that code, in all we do in our work and life, and read that:

"Omnipresence!"

CONCLUSION

Luckert concludes his treatise with an observation that "The near monopoly position that foresters historically held in forest management has been supplanted by competition from other professionals that are ready and willing to face the natural and social science complexities that forests present." He goes further to conclude that foresters still have a "comparative advantage in managing forest resources given the wealth of knowledge that has accumulated in decades of service as forestland managers."

Finally, I want to wrap up with what I consider to be our biggest competitive advantage as a profession. Our "Ace in the Hole" as it were:

You and I are trained and educated to look at and manage for LONG TERM RETURNS. While the business model that has swept up our world in the last

decade appears to have been a two year horizon of return on investment, you and I are used to working returns based on 20 years, 40 years, 75 years and more, depending on the ecosystem, forest type and management objectives we are given.

Today, more than ever, society needs people accustomed to a long-term vision. It took decades of short-term horizons, unrealistic and unsustainable returns on investment, and—in the words of President Obama just two days ago: “a collective unwillingness to make hard decisions to plunge America into our current crisis.” As I said earlier, it will take long term vision to recover. America needs our kind of thinking today. Again, read that “Omnipresence.”

To paraphrase the immortal words of Archie Bunker: “we could use a man like Jeremy Bentham again!””The greatest good for the greatest number in the long term” Remember that line? That is the same charge that Teddy Roosevelt’s Secretary of Agriculture (Wilson) gave to Gifford Pinchot in the mission statement of the U.S. Forest Service in 1905.

Far from Impotent, the long term concepts of forestry are more Important than ever. America in 2009 needs the vision of people like us—professional foresters—again!

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