

FACT SHEET

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Timber & Timber Harvesting in West Virginia

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Forest Management and Wildlife – Changes In Perception

Wildlife is important to most West Virginians. Some say it ranks just behind aesthetics and well above timber and investment income. As such, it is the driving force behind numerous environmental protection efforts. Wildlife management includes both game and non-game, although non-game is just a small part of it. In theory, the science is supposed to embrace all vertebrate animals and their plant and animal associates. In 1940, when President Roosevelt signed a presidential proclamation combining the Bureau of Fisheries with the Bureau of Biological Survey into the U. S. Wildlife Service, he, at the last minute wrote in “fish and” thereby creating the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This political gesture has since firmed a popular idea that fish are not wildlife.

Wildlife has been ruled state property even though the forests it lives in are mostly privately owned. Thus, timber harvesting practices and the resulting impact on wildlife are always closely monitored. Some activist groups, in an apparent effort to recreate “idyllic” pioneer wilderness living conditions, routinely ignore biological facts and considerations in their desire to stop professional timber harvesting. This, of course, has proved impossible, but with the help of activist federal employees in the Forest Service, EPA and Department of the Interior, but the movement is now gaining momentum.

It’s also true that the general public is isolated from the traditional uses of the forest and forest products. Only a small percentage of our current population grew up on farms and the number of people older than 60 is rapidly expanding as is the number of single parent families. Consequently, more and more are now living in towns, cities and other urban areas. These urbanites do not view natural resource issues the same as people who grew up in rural areas.

State game and fish agencies were created to regulate the harvest and rebuild populations of wildlife for recreational purposes. This seemed proper after the virgin timber had been removed and the wild animal populations had been drastically lowered. In recent years, however, agency duties have been expanded due to the Wilderness Act, National Forest Management Act, Endangered Species Act, Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act, among others. These laws are noteworthy for three reasons. People schooled more in political compromise than science wrote them, they favor animal wildlife over other uses of the forest and they mandate

public input in decision-making activities. Public input sections now allow patrons to make many decisions that scientifically trained natural resource professionals used to make. Activism is a new industry with a coterie of people in each State making their living by routinely challenging decisions in the Courts. This has served to erode public confidence in government agencies. In addition, large foundations as the Rockefeller Brothers and Rockefeller Family Funds, Pew Charitable Trusts, W. Alton Jones Fund, as well as the U.S. Forest Service and EPA help finance the efforts.

As their influence has eroded, government agencies have necessarily shifted activities from science to garnering favor of the various special interest citizen groups, often called stakeholders. Sustainability of timber and game are now second to aesthetics, parks, and high-use recreation that are, as with ATV mud racing, sometimes very environmentally damaging. Decisions have become politicized as agencies change their efforts from scientific resource management to anything that will enhance public trust and insure agency perpetuation.

Is the trend short term? Such a question can not be answered authoritatively, but societal trends translate into opportunities for employment and natural resource schools have been changing their professional philosophy in order to conform. Conservation Biology now supersedes sustainable use. Examples such as the spotted owl are proof that the needs of animals sometime take precedence over the needs of people.

Management of forests for wood will be increasingly securitized in the future. Professional activists will continue efforts to alter the value systems of various public groups. They will continue to insist that we can continue to live as a rapidly expanding society that needs more and more resources each day without actually increasing the production of natural resources.

The challenges to professional forestry are great. The atmosphere, even among some trade associations, for professionals bucking the trend is cool, but sometimes opportunities do develop to reinsert biological function in forest management. The public relations acronym ICE – image, competence and exposure – can serve as a guide. For image, talk up the wildlife managers version of habitat – four-season food, cover, water and space. Emphasize how these determine the animal carrying capacity of the land and how professional timber management enhances wildlife habitat and greatly helps professional wildlife biologists. Be certain that your statements are factual and use actual examples of success to show professional competence. As for exposure, don't be shy about appearing on public forums to discuss forestry success stories. If you don't have the time, but do have the opportunity, ask the West Virginia Forestry Association to provide assistance.

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