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# No One Except Foresters

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# No One Except Foresters

by  
JOE BORNONG

James Watt has been attributed with saying that there is no reason to pursue a far-sighted policy of resource conservation because the end of the world is so near at hand that long range planning is a waste of time. The problems with that statement are that, one, he may be right, and two, such a view has pervaded our society for a longer period than just the current Washington administration. One of the first things I learned in elementary economics was that no one plans longer than five years into the future. No one, that is, except foresters.

Considering the range of human history, the short term attitude is a relatively recent phenomenon, initiating in the generation of grandchildren of the industrial revolution. The immediate ancestors are the geometric growth patterns of human population, travel and communication speed, and other technological developments. Long range planning requires prediction, and prediction is risky in a rapidly changing environment. Thus the short term attitude was born.

The evolution can be likened on a small scale to a two hundred acre lake which passes from exclusive use by a few canoes to dominant use by many motorboats. No longer can a trip all the way to the other end of the lake be planned. The immediate concern of missing a collision with the nearest neighbor boats requires the full attention of each pilot.

Students of forestry should be angry. Our own field has developed in nearly a mirror image of the engineering and socio-economic fields. Forestry started in a motor boat of exploitation in the cut and run era. Now, we are canoeists, plying management plan lakes that may take one hundred years or more to cross. However, I have heard very few voices even trying to shout above the roar of the motors to protect themselves from the threat that the motorboaters have the power to sink all the canoes.

My first plans to study forestry had large basis in the fact that I could always climb up on a hilltop somewhere, look out over the land and sky, and satisfy both my conscience and anyone with a strong work ethic by saying, "But this is my work. I'm watching these trees grow." Of course, I quickly learned that there is more to forestry than that. Still, I clung for a while to my dream of a hilltop and grumbled at obligations that seemed headed in another direction. As a student, the most common detours were the class requirements like economics, sociology, and English. They weren't forestry, and forestry was what I had paid to learn.

As a practitioner, I could also find it very easy to head for the hilltop. Why should I worry about population control or a national energy program? They aren't forestry. From a long range point of view, however, such

"political" concerns must become concerns of foresters as well. In "Population Stabilization—the Ultimate Conservation Issue," Robert D. Ray Jr. reiterated the Society of American Foresters' 1967 policy on population control in the May 1981 *Journal of Forestry*:

The Society recognizes that forest resources are only one factor in the ratio of man to land. Integrated planning of all natural and human resource programs is important to a total conservation effort. If human populations expand uncontrolled, no program of natural-resources conservation can long be successful.

Such a statement I would analogize as one coming from a canoeist who sometimes rides in a political motorboat to try and direct traffic for the safety of canoeists and motorboaters alike. More foresters should venture into similar attempts. All foresters should at least plunge into the study of the economic and political mechanics of motorboats like the one driven by James Watt in order to keep from getting swamped.

As a student of forestry I learned about pathogens, cover types, soil horizons and all the rest. Like most of my peers, I forgot the details shortly after finals week. But I have retained the more important concerns, the long term attitude that a forester must apply to all of his or her decisions and the knowledge of my responsibility to the foresters and all the others who are coming in the generations ahead. I won't be here to see the stands of lodgepole that I had a hand in thinning as a Forest Service summer employee mature into their future product, and I won't derive any benefit from that wood's eventual use. But it was my boss' job as a forester to plan the thinning, and my job as a student to carry it out, so that those future benefits could be realized. Similarly, it is everyone's job to plan now for the good of their children, grandchildren, and beyond. Foresters, versed from the beginning on long range planning, have a special responsibility in keeping the decision-making process out of the exclusive control of the James Watts of this country who know nothing more than the five year plan. It is our duty to stand up in our canoes, while they are still afloat, and do some shouting.

*Joe Bornong is a 1981 Forestry Graduate from Iowa State University and is now attending the University of Iowa Law School.*