Into the 21st Century: Employment Opportunities for the Professional Forester

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My target for these comments is neither forestry students nor alumni, but rather young people considering the forestry profession as well as parents, teachers and others who might provide counsel as career choices are considered. I am addressing students in secondary school who contemplate entering a university level professional forestry program between now and the end of the next decade, the year 2000. Thus, I am thinking of men and women who will look back on their own professional involvement from the 2040’s. In a very real sense, this note must be a commentary on the future of forestry itself.

**A basis for choice.**

Without undue risk, I believe I can say that the great majority of people who now identify themselves as foresters were motivated initially by the appeal of the outdoors, of natural environments. We derived great pleasure from hiking, camping, hunting, fishing and other activities in which we took part in wide-open spaces. Motivation, for many, also included a strong alturistic component, a desire to save, to conserve, to use a dwindling resource more affectively.

The blend of these elements varies from one individual to another, and while they are important they do not assure success as a professional forester. If personal enjoyment of the forest environment is one’s primary objective, then perhaps one should be a very successful ball player, stock broker, surgeon or contractor.

There are several conditions and circumstances that can be identified as essential to opportunities for professional careers in forestry:

1. People want or need things and services derived from the forest resource or conditions associated with the forest resource.
2. People are willing to accept the real cost of making forest benefits available.
3. There is a forest resource. The science, technology and institutions are available to enhance the flow of benefits derived from the forest resource.
4. There are people competent in the science, technology and institutions of forestry, people who can help to generate the product, services and conditions which others desire of the forest resource. These people are foresters.

**What will people want?**

The past four decades have seen a tremendous expansion in the product and use of the forest resource. From earlier emphasis on timber, watershed conditions and forage with a relatively low intensity of management, recent developments have added recreation, fish and game, minerals and aesthetics. Conflict has increased among these groups who use different aspects of the forest resource. Each group has become more vocal in protecting and promoting its special interest and in criticizing management practices. In response to such criticism, new laws have been passed to change and modify such practices. So the effective input of people and the intensity of forest management have both increased substantially. This trend will continue. Looking ahead over the next four or five decades, anticipation of more people with greater purchasing power is generally accepted. Estimates suggest that use of the forest resource will more than double over the next four or five decades.
Will people accept the cost?

As with most things, there are costs associated with providing the kinds, quantities, and qualities of goods and services people desire of the forest resource. For some benefits, the costs are recognized but this is not the case for other benefits derived of the resource.

In part, this is because forestry, and wildland management more broadly, are in an extended period of transition from frontier to managed resource; from extraction to cultivation. Over past decades many of the forest benefits we have enjoyed have been available at little or no cost. For commodities, we have borne the cost of harvest and conversion, but have not fully recognized the cost of producing the substance from which such products are derived.

We must recognize the correlation between the cost of providing forest benefits and the flow of benefits. We must commit ourselves to accepting this cost, or see such benefits diminish drastically.

A critical cost of forest resource management and use is the cost of competent personnel at all levels. Capable people are the key to assuring that commodities, services and conditions that people want will be available at the rates desired in future decades. The forestry profession exists and foresters earn a livelihood because they are best qualified to manage and utilize the forest resource to provide what people want of it.

The resource.

Roughly one third of the land area of the United States is forested and another third is in range. However, the myriad quantitative measures available are totally inadequate to describe the forest resource. The critical attribute is its capacity to meet the growing human demands which will be placed on it over the decades to come. Such capacity will depend not only upon the area and physical characteristics of the forest, but also on the continuing advance of forestry-related science and technology, the capability of policy-makers and managers, and on the perceptions and sensitivities of users.

Opportunities for professional careers in forest resource management and utilization will not be constrained by physical limits or diminution of the resource. Quite the contrary! Growing demands relative to a diminishing land resource base will expand opportunities for foresters.

Foresters

The challenge which forestry faces is that of raising the productivity of the entire forest resource system. The prospect for successful professional careers in forestry is, to a large degree, contingent upon the capacity of foresters to meet this challenge effectively.

Forestry has always been an integrated field, drawing heavily from many different disciplines. As a consequence, foresters have had a rather broad academic base, though sometimes at the expense of depth in pertinent areas. As we move into the 21st century, foresters will be better equipped to perform the varied roles they are called upon to play.

The following are some of the trends which can be anticipated:

1. A greater degree of specialization within forestry.
2. With increased specialization, enhanced skill in functioning as a member of a team.
3. A strengthened ecological basis for planning.
4. More highly developed analytical skills.
5. More effective public relations, including conflict resolution.
6. Greater sensitivity to the full spectrum of values inherent in the forest resource.

Others of equal or greater significance may be added. It seems clear, however, that the capabilities of foresters will change appreciably in very positive ways.

Over the whole spectrum of benefits derived from the forest land base, much more will be desired over the decades to come. Individually, and as a society, we will be willing to assume the real costs of assuring the availability of desired outputs and conditions. The competence of foresters in raising the productivity of the forest resource will be advanced markedly.

Together, these prospects suggest challenging career opportunities for professional foresters. The greatest contributions may well be made in the decades ahead.