



Save the forest, cut the trees

How logging and conservation intersect in New Hampshire

By Jeff Mucciarone jmucciarone@hippopress.com

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What is strikingly visible in a recently harvested section of Jon Martin's wood lot in New Hampton is the trees, lots of them. Sure, there are stumps strewn about as well, but the harvested area looks substantially like a forest. That's the idea.

"It's all about the big picture of the forest," said Martin, a forester with the company Foreco. "What's best in the short and long terms."

About 84 percent of New Hampshire is forested, with 80 percent of the forested lands privately owned and 20 percent government-owned. The state didn't always have the forests it has today. In the 1800s, 30 percent of the state was forested.

In the northern parts of the state, hardwood species like birch, beech and maple do well. In the south, there's a lot more red oak. White pines are fairly dominant in the southern and central parts of the state. In the most northern points, there are spruce and fir trees.

Foresters and loggers often get a bad rap for the harvesting part of the job. Officials say there are a few bad apples in the logging industry giving the whole lot a bad name. Foresters worry that if landowners are only given the option to sell their lands, as opposed to harvesting them, then the land will most certainly be sold to developers and then it's goodbye forests. Forestry gives landowners a chance to harvest wood in a sustainable way and thus make a little money while ensuring the property remains a forest.

"If a landowner doesn't have an incentive to hold the land, they're not going to hold it," said Sarah Smith, a forester with the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. "We all recognize that development is the biggest threat to the forest."

Public opinion can be a big threat too. That's why educating people about what forest management is about is so important, Smith said.

There have been times when there is a lot of development. The current economic downturn has slowed that recently, but Smith said the reality is the population will increase and people have to live somewhere. So the name of the game is planning for that growth — set aside the pristine woodlands and slate the more marginal forest properties for development, she said.

A recent Wildlands and Woodlands (www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org) report found New England is losing its forest cover. In Massachusetts, a moratorium on logging is in effect. The potential for a moratorium to happen in New Hampshire is a nightmare for loggers, obviously, but it's also troublesome for those charged with protecting forests in New Hampshire, like, say, the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (www.spnhf.org). They say forests need to be managed, in a sustainable way.

Forestry is still about making money from a forest's byproduct — wood. But that's not all it's about.

The foresters are the tree doctors. They design how a forest grows by the goals of the landowner. They're taking into account primarily water quality, recreation, timber production and wildlife. Those factors are all intertwined, said Jeff Eames, who owns Fort Mountain Companies (www.nhlogger.com) in Allenstown.

Most foresters in New Hampshire today advocate for sustainable forestry practices and a focus on long-term property management. The clear-cuts, except when deemed

environmentally beneficial, are not parts of sustainable foresting. The term “clear-cut” has taken on a decidedly negative connotation — people think of massive tracts of lands without any life on them, they think of developments — but it isn’t always evil. What’s happening out west and is sensationalized on television programs isn’t the logging and foresting that’s happening in New Hampshire, officials say. Typically in the Granite State, it’s selective harvesting, where companies pluck a tree here or there.

“The forest provides a lot of economic foundation to the state,” Smith said. She said the forest is a \$1.7 billion piece of the state’s economy. “It’s a big chunk of the economic engine that moves the state.”

The timber industry includes the foresters, loggers, truckers, saw mills, power plants and furniture makers. Smith said every step along the way is adding value to the production.

Driving through Allenstown and Deerfield, Eames pointed out spot after spot that he harvested five, 10, 20 and 25 years ago. What’s noticeable today is that those stands are full again. They largely always were, even after they were harvested. He pointed out a recently harvested stand of white pines; it wasn’t a clear-cut by any means, but was a forest, albeit a thinner one. Eames said the early growth of new trees was coming in particularly nicely in some spots.

Loggers largely cover their tracks, literally. It’s difficult to tell where loggers have been. Many of the cuts Eames points out are only somewhat visible. That’s on purpose. Loggers try to make it look as though they haven’t been there as much as possible. The road or trails companies build for access often turn into hiking trails.

It was also noticeable that most of the trees left in harvested locations were rather good-looking trees. That’s also on purpose. If loggers leave behind the healthy trees to seed the next generation, that increases the chances the next time they harvest that parcel, 30 to 50 years down the road, the trees will be money-makers, Eames said.

Patrick Kenney, one of Eames’ two on-staff foresters, goes through a property and marks every tree that’s to be cut. He develops a plan with the landowner. And he needs to be able to provide the landowner with an estimate ahead of time as to how much a harvest will net him or her. So he needs to know if there are slicer logs, veneer wood, wood for paper pulp or if it’s just biomass. Sometimes cuts are done to clear the way for the more lucrative products, Kenney said.

And yet, foresting also doesn’t mean wiping out the trees that aren’t beneficial to cabinet makers. Beech trees have their place in the forest. Even if they aren’t sought after for wood products, they are sought after by wildlife, Martin said in June over the whir of mosquitoes.

Foresters work with land owners to find out about their goals for the property, be they wood harvest, recreation or land conservation. If the goal is to clear-cut a swath of land

to maximize the dollars now, then Martin is likely to take a pass on that job. That's not what his company stands for.

"It's not just extracting," Martin said.

It's also not all walking through the woods philosophizing about the forest. The actual harvesting is still dramatic. For a tree-lover, it's still jarring. There's the skidder, which looks like a front-end loader, minus the bucket, which is replaced by two c-shaped arms that clasp and drag downed trees to the logging yard. It has bulging wheels covered with chains. It's a menacing-looking machine. Then there's the slasher, which comes with an arm for snatching trees off the ground. It runs them through a circular device that strips the branches, and then lays logs down to be sawed by either an oversized chain saw or an oversized spinning saw. It's violent. The trees wobble from side to side in the clasp of the arm. At the end of the day though, society didn't all of a sudden decide it doesn't need wood. So violent, yes, but necessary, also yes, loggers say.

Sustainable forestry has a sort of fine line between regulations and landowner rights. Smith said Massachusetts tends to fall more toward regulation, while New Hampshire relies more on its population to make the right decisions. If a single-acre stand of pine trees is turned into a parking lot, that is never going to be as sustainable as that plot remaining a forest, no matter how the plot is harvested in the long term, she said.

Managing an already clear-cut landscape

Most of New England was essentially clear-cut during the 1800s to make way for sheep farmers as the demand for wool exploded — so the landscape isn't untouched. Cutting it all down allowed certain species to take hold and to dominate areas where they once didn't exist or at least weren't so prevalent. It meant for big changes in how wildlife lived in the forests. Farm abandonment is what largely resulted in all the pine trees in the state. That's still happening to an extent today, Smith said.

Martin said hundreds of thousands of acres of forest were just wiped out. The native hardwood species were reduced, and the pine trees picked up the slack.

"Pine was king in New England," Martin said.

With farm abandonment, trees grew back at the same rate — many of the forests were basically all the same age. That's not so good for wildlife. Animals rely on a variety of habitat to survive, and many, such as deer and migratory birds, rely heavily on early successional forests, which are young forests. That's why the government, in some cases both state and federal, contracts with loggers and foresters to pinpoint good spots for clear-cuts that will help animals, such as the cottontail rabbit. Eames pulled over to show a state-contracted job in Durham adjacent to the Great Bay, where loggers clear-cut a section to create habitat for the rabbit.

If rodents and rabbits don't have proper habitat then they can't survive. If there are no small mammals, then bobcats, foxes and coyotes don't have anything to eat either. "It sort of bounces down the line," Smith said.

Some might wonder how clear-cuts occurred in the old days, prior to logging. Wind storms, much like the one that occurred this past winter, and forest fires were the main natural occurrences that created clearings for wildlife. Wind storms still happen, but there isn't much room to let wildfires roam. And since all the land was cleared at once previously, much of the forest habitat today is mature, and thus could use a little breathing room, officials say.

Now foresters will often suggest clear-cutting certain sections to create meadows that animals like deer or mice or rabbits need, areas that today are somewhat lacking from the landscape. Martin once nearly stumbled upon a fawn nestled in a field he had clear-cut. When Martin bought his 245-acre wood lot, it had no open space. He fairly recently made a seven-acre clear-cut he intends to keep clear. Along the side is a massive pile of stumps that makes for fantastic habitat for small mammals, insects and birds.

"It's a huge critter condo," he said.

The White Mountain National Forest is such an old forest that it lacks wildlife diversity. Animals, particularly deer and moose, don't have multiple ages of things to eat, Smith said.

"If you whack down an acre, the very next year it's all brush," Smith said. "That's exactly what moose are looking for. Whereas in deep old forests, they don't have much to eat. The best situation is you have everything. A hurricane can create diversity because it kind of messes things up."

Forests are resilient.

"If you stop shaving, you grow a forest," Martin said.

Eames said forests are forever but trees are not. Trees are like people — the older they get, the more vulnerable and susceptible they become, he said.

Some think whenever a tree is cut, a new one needs to be planted in its place. The natural regeneration would overwhelm any plantings, unless foresters are looking to change the complexion of a forest by introducing new species.

That's why when people donate money to the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests to help it plant trees, Jack Savage, vice president of communications and outreach for the Society, asks, "Got a minute?" Planting trees isn't really what it's all about. It's managing forests so that forest continues to be forest, but also a healthy forest.

“It’s about walking on a property and hearing a different bird that you’ve never heard there before, because you’ve included a different type of habitat that you never had before,” Eames said. “It’s about using a trail built by loggers for cross-country skiing. It’s about doing a cut that leaves hemlock stands for a deer yard to keep in the wildlife.... It’s not all about the money.”

Foresteering, art and science

One section of Martin’s lot does have considerably more cut trees than others. That’s because pine trees are suffering from a fungus that bores into the bark. He cut down more than he normally would as a way to help prevent the spread of the fungus, which ultimately kills the tree.

“What we do is we open up the stand, reduce the amount of trees per acre, get a lot of air and sun in there, keep it dry and sunny...,” Martin said.

With all the wet weather this past year, conditions were a little too good for the fungus. Leaving the area more open should dry out the fungus.

Walking through Martin’s property, one sees a transition from white pine to red oak to hemlock. The red oaks are prolific seeders, and the hemlocks with their many branches and thick needles actually hold back the snowfall, creating a sort of insulation for deer in the winter, Martin said. His company, Foreco, started in 1980 and currently manages 62,000 acres of forests.

A forester could help someone who just bought 300 acres figure out what to do with the land. They don’t have to do anything but the forester can take the landowner through the factors and possibilities. It’s not all about cutting trees for money. A goal could be enhancing land for wildlife habitat or cutting trees to enhance a view. It might be revenue generation. The objectives can be anything, Smith said.

“The forester can ferret that out,” Smith said.

For Martin, it’s not just about picking out the best trees to cut; it’s also about picking out the best trees to cut 50 to 100 years from now. It’s also about providing a landscape for deer and small mammals.

“Everything in moderation and diversify,” Martin said, adding that foresteering is like gardening on a 100-year basis.

A forester is looking far down the road. He’ll develop a management plan for a property, dependent on the landowner’s goals. The plan would include recommendations as to what kinds of things to do at certain time intervals. If there is going to be harvesting, there are all kinds of laws that come into play. For one, once timber is cut down, towns are able to assess a 10-percent tax on the value of the timber. If there are wetlands in the area, permits will be needed, Smith said.

“Often there’s a lot of complexity to it,” Smith said.

The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests works with willing land owners who want to create conservation easements on their property. Those easements don’t prevent landowners from harvesting wood from the property; they just guarantee that when the owner dies, the land will continue to be forested, rather than turned into a development, Savage said.

Things weren’t always sustainable. In the 1960s, loggers would make cuts without leaving a single stick behind.

“You always want to have a balance of regeneration,” Eames said.

“It’s as much art as a science,” Martin added.

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