

Policy and Ecology in Forest History

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Policy and Ecology in Forest History

BOOKS ABOUT FOREST HISTORY usually attempt one of two goals: either they demonstrate the importance of forests in defining human society, or they present forests as human artifacts, shaped in the play of events and struggles that make up our history. Together, the two books under review, Peter N. Nemetz, ed., *Emerging Issues in Forest Policy* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1992) and L. Anders Sandberg, ed., *Trouble in the Woods: Forest Policy and Social Conflict in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick* (Fredericton, Acadiensis Press, 1992), accomplish both aims. Moreover, because they reveal the dynamics behind our current relation to the forests, both stand at the intersection of intellectual inquiry and public policy. And each, in its own way, is a sobering volume.

Peter Nemetz's book includes 22 articles based in forestry, forest economics and ecology. These articles challenge old assumptions by placing forests in a global context. The book begins at the juncture of forest ecology and the world's climate and atmosphere. Among other things, authors assess the effects of air pollution and global warming on various tree species, including those that make up the forests along the eastern Canadian-United States border. Although the multiple stresses on today's forests are hard to disentangle, the authors show that overall the health of the world's forests is under threat. Forest removal, in turn, affects climate and atmosphere through a chain of events involving such diverse phenomena as solar radiation, latent heat fluxes, soil hydrology, cloud formation and the release of carbon. On a world scale, authors hazard predictions that are reminiscent of George Perkins Marsh's monumental *Man and Nature*, first published in 1867, although the issues today appear more complicated and more comprehensive.

Having established the links between the well-being of the forest and that of the planet, the book assesses the global market expansion that drives current levels of forest cutting. Articles comparing productivity performance in the U.S. and Canadian forest industries, modelling the impact of the pending Free Trade Agreement and describing the complicated variables affecting trade between countries drive home the impression that Canadian forest industries, like those elsewhere, operate in a global context. In this international setting, traditional supply and demand variables take on a dizzying complexity. Comparative processing efficiencies, exchange rates, multiple sources of competition, public land policies, aboriginal claims, production subsidies and non-timber uses all make analysis and prediction extremely tenuous. Authors, for instance, model a stunning array of variables to determine the local impact of raw-log exports from British Columbia.

This section, like the first, demonstrates the complexities of policy-making in a period of transition from old-growth forests to managed secondary and plantation stands, from traditional concepts of timber and non-timber values to new forms of multiple use and from regional forest planning to aggregate world models. Nevertheless, the authors highlight the benefits of cross-disciplinary, international thinking about forest policy.

Having demonstrated the world-wide scope of forestry decisions, Nemetz and his authors turn to matters of local or regional forest use. Both the particularity and the

universality of human experience with the forest are made clear in several cross-cultural comparisons. Timber-based communities in British Columbia and Japan's Kyoto Prefecture, for instance, both suffered rural outmigration and job loss as a result of transPacific log exports from British Columbia. Comparisons between the Swiss Alps and the Rocky Mountains over the past two centuries show that traditional multiple-use concepts do not readily apply to temperate mountain forests. The range of differences in human interaction with forests argues for greater sensitivity to local impacts of forest projects and for re-evaluating such fundamental forest-policy principles as community stability, multiple use and sustained yield.

A more direct assault on entrenched thinking is William F. Hyde's article on "social forestry", or the local use of forests for domestic consumption. Fuel wood, fodder, forage, domestic lumber and nonwood plants, he argues, are important components of multiple use that should be considered alongside older evaluations based on commercial timber, water and recreation. Daniel W. Bromley elaborates this perspective on local forest use in a fascinating article on community rights to forest use and management. By making a crucial distinction between open-access and common-property resource regimes, Bromley challenges the doctrine that "common lands" invite only pillage and plunder. In the 19th century, he observes, colonial administrators often dismantled the community regimes that provided the only effective sanctions against forest abuse. Bereft of authority, common management degenerated into open access, two conditions westerners often conflate. Investing the "tragedy of the commons" with a historical framework, Bromley offers a powerful critique of Garrett Hardin's allegorical defence of resource privatization.¹ Other authors explore various combinations of local ownership, access, and management, revealing the variety of cultural variables that can be crucial to the success of forestry projects. Such considerations, it is argued, "demonstrate the need for understanding trees as social as well as biological constructs" (p. 480).

This thick volume, ironically, is at its best in demonstrating the gaps in our knowledge, at pointing out the need for new and ever more complex layers of analysis in this global setting. It challenges the assumption that policy can be moulded around a single pollutant or an exclusive benefit derived from a single market. To the traditional multiple-use triad of watershed, recreation and timber, for example, must be added not only local concerns captured in the concept of social forestry, but also world-wide considerations relating to atmospheric stasis.

Although the authorship is impressively cosmopolitan, there is an overall sensitivity to the Canadian audience for *Emerging Issues*. Directly or indirectly, the commentary highlights the importance of Canadian forest policy and the global context into which it must be placed. Despite the current attention to tropical forests, for example, the world's boreal forests may be even more threatened. As Roger A. Sedjo points out in this volume, tropical forests demonstrate surprising regenerative attributes. On the other hand, we know little about degradation of

1 See Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons", *Science*, 162 (13 December 1968), pp. 1243-8.

boreal forests or their capacity for recovery. Moreover, Canada's forests, with their associated soils and peatlands, are more important than tropical forests in storing global carbon.

Finally, this book suggests an exciting opportunity for historians, whose work stands to be enriched by these new cultural, geographical and ecological perspectives. In addition, however, the book alerts us to a critical historical gap in understanding world environments: while the authors have gone far in expanding forestry concepts, they generally ignore the dimension of time. This multifaceted analysis shows little appreciation for historical evolution or human agency; the overall mood suggests the inevitability of the present.

The beginnings of a truly "planetary" forest history are already in hand in anthologies edited by Donald Worster, Richard P. Tucker and John F. Richards.² These volumes describe the historical dynamics behind the current state of the forest: changing social orders, demographic growth, colonial powers, expanding transport networks spreading commodity production. Complementing the themes in *Emerging Issues*, they show that external systems of power and economic domination have been shaping regional land-use patterns for some time.

That, in sum, is also the lesson of *Trouble in the Woods*. This collection of essays begins with the assertion that foreign pulp and paper corporations historically dominated life and politics in much of 20th-century New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. The players in this drama include the companies themselves, the client-states that brokered their power and the men and women whose lives were affected by this system and who in turn have recently begun reshaping the configurations of wealth and power in the two provinces.

The articles are deftly arranged to demonstrate how this situation unfolded. Raymond Léger and Serge Côté, for instance, detail the rise of large-scale industrial forestry in New Brunswick after 1875. Both show that sawmilling was quickly centralized in the hands of a few large, politically well-connected foreign corporations and that the accumulation of vast forestland reserves proved crucial to this process. They also note the changing size and duration in Crown land cutting permits. Ostensibly, longer permits assured forest conservation: "Le concessionnaire, disait-on, n'avait pas d'intérêt à ravager son territoire, mais plutôt à en planifier rationnellement l'exploitation pendant toute la durée de son permis" (p. 44). In fact, Côté shows, reasons for the longer permits could be found in the growing power of the millowners and financiers and in the speculative nature of the concessions.

Large companies eventually held concessions in virtual perpetuity. This "quasi-propriété" (p. 46) was at once a key objective of the emerging sawmilling industry and a vehicle for extending the companies' hegemony over the rest of the economy. Settlers' limited access to good forest or agricultural resources, combined with a company-controlled credit system, assured millowners a steady supply of timber and labour, and at the same time forged a culture of industrialization in the

2 See Donald Worster, ed., *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (New York, 1988) and Richard P. Tucker and John F. Richards, eds., *Global Deforestation and the Nineteenth-Century World Economy* and also their *World Deforestation in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, North Carolina, 1983 and 1988).

forest region. The emergence of pulp and paper producers after 1915 brought more changes in the regional economy. Operators cut smaller diameter trees, holdings were concentrated and client-state interventions shifted in favour of the new industry.

Cape Breton Island's "Big Lease" provides an even more pointed example of company control over Crown lands. L. Anders Sandberg discusses manipulations of this huge tract of marginal forestland as an example of Nova Scotia's industrial policy. The lease was acquired by the colourful and controversial Frank J.D. Barnjum, who used his political connections first to weaken its manufacturing provisions and then to market the concession. The government's unqualified support for speculators such as Barnjum was premised on the assumption that forfeiture would leave the forest completely fallow. Ironically, the final speculative phase in the history of the Big Lease ended with a government purchase of the lease in 1957 and its resale to a Swedish pulp company, Stora Kopparberg. Once again a desperate government turned over rights to the land to an international company and exacted few conditions for promoting forest conservation or the welfare of Nova Scotia's people.

Nancy Colpitts challenges the argument that this economic hegemony was inexorable — that pulp and paper production was the only hope for a depressed rural economy. In the town of Alma, New Brunswick sawmilling remained viable until the surrounding region became a national park in 1947. Far from inevitable, the shift from sawmilling to paper production was related to restricted forest access as the politically powerful pulp and paper industry extended its control over Crown lands in the 1920s. Kell Antoft's study of the 1969 Nova Scotia Land Holdings Disclosure Act shows how pervasive this sanctification of nonresident property rights was. Triggered by concerns over nonresident real estate development, the act, which simply required nonresident owners to file a disclosure statement, was progressively weakened as provincial legislators vented fears about Nova Scotia's climate for investment.

Beginning in the 1960s, small woodlot owners' organizations challenged this corporate hegemony in both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Independent producers won state-sanctioned marketing structures, but as articles by Bill Parenteau and Peter Clancy point out, legislation fell short of the proponents' intentions. Pulpwood marketing structures brought some successes, but they forced small producers to articulate their demands through narrow bureaucratic channels in a political atmosphere dominated by big corporations. Companies enjoyed enormous leverage in the struggle for support from the state. After achieving some successes, the producers' movements fragmented, which further limited their political and economic effectiveness.

Conservation was also sacrificed to schemes for attracting investment. The 1962 Nova Scotia Forest Improvement Act, as Glyn Bissix and L. Anders Sandberg demonstrate, was endorsed by paper manufacturers in order to encourage more efficient cutting among small woodlot owners. Yet when the resulting Forest Practices Improvement Board assumed a "soft" management philosophy, centred around selective cutting, natural regeneration and species and age diversity, the industry mounted a successful campaign against the very act it had fought to

secure. Despite widespread popular support, the act was repealed and replaced by a new one making forest conservation essentially voluntary. The repeal illustrated corporate control over basic issues of forest use, but as Bissix and Sandberg explain, repeal was possible partly because those supporting the soft forestry position — foresters, environmentalists and marginal participants in the forest industry — were unable to form a cohesive coalition.

These articles demonstrate the enormous power big capital wielded in a region bent on “industrialization by invitation”. Provincial governments used their one crucial bargaining chip — their forests — to attract investment, and having offered this up they became captive agencies. These tightly interrelated studies explore the various ways in which consolidated control over land, timber and jobs produced dramatic disparities in wealth and power.

What is missing from this analysis is a sense of how corporate hegemony made an impact on the forest itself. Other than brief descriptions in Côté and Colpitts, readers gain no real appreciation that the forests, like the small producers, were victims or agents in this epic battle. Moreover, there is little sense that anyone voiced a genuine interest in classic forestry issues — those principles around which Nemetz’s volume pivots. Compared to recent studies in U.S. forest history, which give forests and the agencies that managed them a more dynamic, if not more autonomous, historical role, *Trouble in the Woods* lacks an important dimension.³ Federal foresters struggled to define their collective aspirations; the forest receded, changed composition and then recolonized abandoned farmlands. That this dimension is absent in the Maritime picture reflects historical differences in state/provincial and federal jurisdictions over forestlands. But it also illustrates differences in methodological approach: Maritime historians use regional dependency theory and understand power relations in much more sophisticated ways; U.S. forest historians, too often naïve in their neglect of corporate hegemony, are more sensitive to environmental history and national traditions of forest conservation.

In Maine, where my own expertise lies, there are no national forestlands to speak of and no federal bureaucracy to mediate between corporations and the public. Thus power relations approximate those in the Maritime Provinces. Here, too, a recent volume discusses the tensions between industrialists, a client state, people and forests. A hard-hitting book by Mitch Lansky challenges the current economic and forestry assumptions that buttress industrial abuse of the Maine woods.⁴ Like Nemetz, Lansky offers an intensely detailed analysis of forestry policy and traces its implications for trees and people in Maine. But here again, because the emphasis is on the present, the situation appears cast in stone.

This is exactly what makes *Trouble in the Woods* so important: the past, these authors show, can be a vehicle for imagining other possibilities — ways in which

3 See Harold K. Steen, *The U.S. Forest Service* (Seattle, 1977), Thomas R. Cox, *This Well-Wooded Land* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1985), David A. Clary, *Timber and the Forest Service* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1986) and Michael Williams, *Americans and their Forests* (Cambridge, 1989).

4 Mitch Lansky, *Beyond the Beauty Strip: Saving What's Left of Our Forests* (Gardiner, Maine, 1992).

the interplay of structural changes and topical events might have produced a different world. Nancy Colpitts suggests that New Brunswick's historic mix of resources, labour and capital could have resulted in a more balanced forest economy. Bissix, Sandberg, Parenteau and Clancy imply that history might have proceeded differently if those who challenged corporate hegemony could have overcome their factionalism. Subjunctive terms such as "could have been" and "might have been" are not the usual stock-in-trade of historians; nor are they employed explicitly in this volume. But hypothetical thinking about alternative possibilities is implicit in good history, and these imaginative endeavours can be profoundly liberating.

Peter Clancy and L. Anders Sandberg conclude *Trouble in the Woods* with an observation that local industry confronts mounting competition from high-yield tropical forestry. Yet even in the face of these global pressures, they argue, there is room to negotiate power and wealth in the provinces. Indeed, botany is not destiny: men and women can rethink their relation to industry and government, visualize new forms of ownership and hypothesize more diversified uses for the forests. The obstacles are numerous and the coalitions unwieldy, but just as the past is full of contingencies, the future is full of possibilities. Armed with the global, multicultural and historical perspectives offered in *Recent Issues* and *Trouble in the Woods*, it is possible to conceive a better world.

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