

# We all depend on our forests

I am deeply concerned that today's front page squabbles and gridlock between the so called "hikers and loggers" is overshadowing our shared interest in the health, productivity, and sustainability of our forests.

A recent bill introduced to Congress proposing 48,000 additional acres of federal wilderness in Vermont has reignited the quarrel about the best use of our public land.

## Commentary

Don DeHayes

While the stage for this controversy is Vermont, this type of battle is national in scope.

Such debates about the national forest certainly have their place. However, the people who are knowledgeable and care about forests are on both sides of the debate — pitted against each other on the front pages. Our forests have become just another pawn in a game of partisan politics.

What's lost in all the squabbling is that forests significantly shape all of our lives, whether we live in urban or rural communities.

Forests help define the distinctiveness of our landscape and contribute to our quality of life and our nation's competitive position in an increasingly complex global marketplace. The forest cannot be viewed as only one thing or another, as serving only one set of values. Our broadest understanding of and best science about forests show that the lives and livelihood of all of us depend on forests.

While the debates rage onward, public and private forests are threatened by sprawling development, climate change, air pollution, invasive species, and, perhaps more importantly, by government disinvestment in education and research about forest ecosystems and their management.

Yet the groups that truly care about forests are battling each other.

Whom is the public to believe or trust for information and advice? Why would

young people want to enter this tumultuous field? We all will benefit, as would our forests, by working together to inform neighbors and community leaders about the benefits and values our forests provide.

A few brief examples:

■ New York City's need for clean water was met through thoughtful forest conservation in Catskill Mountain watersheds rather than building new filtration plants, saving billions of dollars and providing naturally clean water to the city.

■ Forest trees and soils consume carbon dioxide and are estimated to store more carbon than is in the atmosphere, thereby slowing the rate of climate warming.

■ Forests provide more than a quarter of all medicines, including the recently discovered compound Taxol from yew trees used to fight cancers, heart disease, and AIDS.

■ Forests provide stormwater and erosion control at little or no cost; when fire damaged the forests of San Diego, the cost of the increased stormwater runoff was tallied at \$25 million.

Our forests support industries that employ millions of citizens and provide products that positively impact our lives. Healthy forests enhance property values and provide habitat that sustain fish and wildlife that enrich our lives.

Forests provide solutions to environmental and societal challenges. Healthy forests stabilize soils, protect headwaters and aquifers, and harbor biodiversity necessary to sustain life. Forests provide beauty, purify our air, and minimize temperature extremes. Ultimately, healthy and productive forests are an important foundation for human health and prosperity.

While enrollment is growing in the University of Vermont's Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources, the national trend, espe-

cially in forestry programs, is the opposite.

National enrollment data compiled at Utah State University has confirmed significantly declining undergraduate enrollments in natural resources and environmental fields at many universities. At the same time, a recent report of the National Research Council has documented dwindling forest research capacity in our agencies and universities.

Instead of battling for limited self-interests, we need to join together to support the roles, values, and potential for forests to serve the greater good.

Looking to the future, the natural resources deans of the 69 universities in the National Association of University Forest Resources Programs have come together to put forward a new vision for America's forests.

Importantly, these programs extend from the Deep South and Southwest to the Pacific Northwest and northern

New England; our diversity is a microcosm of the range of opinion about forest policy nationally. Yet we were able to

find common ground and establish a joint commitment to promoting shared values, applying the best science, and advancing stewardship to create lasting forests.

Our shared statement, "Forests for A Richer Future," is being delivered to members of Congress and other leaders across the nation. Our collective vision speaks with one voice in saying: We all benefit from an investment in our forests — because we all share a future dependent upon the services forests provide.

*Don DeHayes is dean of the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Vermont and president of the National Association of University Forest Resources Programs, a consortium of 69 universities.*

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