



Society of  
American Foresters  
www.safnet.org

John H. Beuter, CF, President, *Corvallis, OR*,  
beuterj@comcast.net

John A. Helms, Vice-President, *Orinda, CA*,  
helms@nature.berkeley.edu

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*Hattiesburg, MS*, jkms394@aol.com

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and Chief Executive Officer, goergenm@safnet.org

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## commentary

# Old-Growth: Science, Advocacy, and Public Values



Michael T. Goergen Jr.

Foresters love old-growth. I know this because when I hike with other foresters into a stand that has the characteristics of old-growth, I invariably hear remarks on its beauty and the joy it imparts. Increment borers and D-tapes are immediately set to work, and cameras capture foresters hugging trees. Of course, what I've described occurs in many forest types when foresters are around. But why has the public also become so captivated by old-growth?

Old-growth was the first forestry issue I faced as a professional. I found it difficult to develop and implement forest policies around a concept that was largely undefined, drastically different depending on forest type, and in many ways a political issue that had little to do with the practice of forestry. It seemed to me that a group of passionate advocates were dictating how forestry must be practiced, even though their understanding of the subject was limited if not altogether absent. The voice of the profession was at the table, but it lacked the passion of the old-growth advocates and so failed to capture the attention of decisionmakers.

Our role as professionals often requires us to leave passion at the door and discuss the science behind forest systems. And this adherence to science

can be mistaken for an indifference to a broader set of values the public holds for its forests. This is one reason that SAF Council adopted the Core Values of the profession—to demonstrate that our values are the public's values.

Further, public values should not be mistaken for advocate values. In our profession, much of the old-growth debate centers on how old-growth is defined. Advocates spend little time worrying about this definition and a lot of time demanding that old-growth be protected. This protectionism seems more like an anti-management stance, a stance that many old-growth advocates then extend to all forests.

Protection should not mean an end to management, any more than management should translate into large-scale logging projects. As has been true for more than a century, forestry is the one profession that addresses the long-term needs of forests. SAF will continue to ask the difficult questions, conduct the meaningful debates, and educate ourselves and the public about managing all of our nation's forests, old-growth and otherwise.

*Michael T. Goergen Jr. is executive vice-president and CEO, Society of American Foresters; goergenm@safnet.org.*