

Old-Growth: Some Questions, Truths and Consequences

Ed Barnard

A few years ago, I picked up *Questioning Technology: Tool, Toy or Tyrant*, edited by John Zerzan and Alice Carnes. I underlined the editors' introductory statement; "This book presents only one side—the other side." Borrowing from their honesty and curious about what might appear in an old-growth issue of the Journal, I offer, if not the other side, perhaps another or some other sides of an important, sometimes controversial, and often emotional issue.

Forests, both young and old, are valued for a variety of reasons, and without argument old-growth forests provide a host of ecological, aesthetic, cultural, and religious positives unique to their genre. It is apparent, however, that difficulty arises in discussions and debates about old-growth in the arenas of understanding, perception, terminology, definitions, and assessment. Scanning websites and pertinent publications, I found an array of old-growth definitions and component criteria variously emphasizing site history, tree age, forest age, land areas, numbers of trees or snags per unit land area, tree sizes, tree mortality, stand composition (including understory and ground cover species), canopy structure, and coarse woody debris. Others employed descriptors—ancient, pristine, original, virgin, irreplaceable. Still others suggested that by definition old-growth forests have been minimally disturbed or totally undisturbed by humans, the reason (expressed or implied) being that humans and their influences are "unnatural." Meaningfully integrating such characteristics and concepts into approaches with broad acceptance while addressing requisite species and forest specificity is a daunting task, further complicated by the fact that our assessments are only point-in-time measures of epochal and dynamic processes. Some fundamental work and consensus are needed before old-growth debates will be resolved.

Questions. What is ancient? pristine? Is a forest that replaces another following an ice age original? virgin? Is a 500-year-old forest on a site cleared by humans 10,000 years ago old-growth? Does a forest classified as old-growth by virtue of meeting nine of 10 arbitrary thresholds (number of trees or snags per unit of land area, say, or a certain canopy structure or age classification) lose its status following a hurricane? If humans are a natural part of their environment (as recognized in some old-growth treatises and necessarily conceded in today's reigning naturalistic world views), what is unnatural about their influence on the forest? Who decides? The intellectually elite? the rich? the powerful? the majority? the courts? If an elephant destroys a tree, is it unnatural? wrong? If old trees are harvested, utilized, and consumed by beavers, do questions of morality and environmental ethics arise? What is minimal disturbance? What is irreplaceable? If there was nothing (no life) and now there is something (life)—the near-consensus of post-modern academicians—who's to say that it can't happen again? And, if entropy eventually prevails, what difference does it make? Where does natural succession play into all this? Is what is, what was? Is what is, what will be? What is desired or preferred? Why? Who says?

Truths. Time is an essential in the debate. Old and big are not an equation; hence, statements to the effect that "old-growth trees or spruce crowns are important to Native Americans for canoes, totem poles, medicines, and whisking away of personal illnesses by shamans," contribute little to the discussion. Forests are dynamic, not static (steady state equilibrium) phenomena. Some species and some forests have disappeared and will disappear "naturally" without (or with?) the influence of humans.

Consequences. Although I enjoy old-growth forests and support the protection of these special resources, there are consequences attached to same. Presumably, old-growth forests contain old-growth (and sometimes large) trees. Such trees rot, die, and fall (inevitably killing some things in the process). Some old-growth forests are fire hazards. Fire (natural or otherwise) burns things, including old trees and forests. Others old-growth forests harbor and fuel outbreaks of insect pests which don't recognize property lines between old-growth forests and neighboring landscape trees or timber investments. "Spillover" raises the specter of liability, border wars, and litigation. In America's fastest-growing forest, the wildland-urban interface, old dead and dying trees in hard-to-reach places present problems. Trees and tree branches (especially old trees and old tree branches) fall on houses, cars, swimming pools, and people. Removal, repairs, and medical expenses are costly, and lawsuits can be more so.

Resolution? J.P. Kimmins (*Forestry Chronicle* 69(3):285–289, 1993) has aptly noted that because such complex issues are only partly scientific in nature, their solutions cannot be found in science (forestry?) alone. In the words of Nobel Prize winner William Golding, resolution is likely to reside in our "capacity to make value judgments, unscientific assessments, the power to decide that this is right, that wrong, this ugly, that beautiful, this just, that unjust, . . . precisely the questions which science is not qualified to answer." Perhaps, but in a society functionally devoid of transcendent moral absolutes, resolution is not imminent.

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