

## The “Problem” of Old Growth

Congress, administrative agencies and the courts have defined old growth many ways over the last forty years. The definitions vary considerably. Scientists’ definitions use the language of ecology and forestry, referring to structure, function, species diversity, complexity and stability. Congressional and agency definitions apply a veneer of scientific terms (“the structure and composition characteristic of the forest type”) to the language of highly qualified political compromise (“in accordance with applicable law” and “based on substantial evidence”). Judges blend statutory and scientific language with that of history and literature. To the general public, “old growth” may be much like Justice Potter’s definition of pornography: they know it when they see it. And what they know and see is defined by their own view of what is “natural,” “beautiful,” “big,” or “undeveloped.”

The “problem” of old growth is the problem of society deciding what public forests should be managed for. Over the forty-year public debate about old growth, no shared vision of what public forests should be has emerged. The debate began over wilderness reserves and roadless areas (land allocation or zoning), evolved into the clearcutting controversy (forest practices), shifted to planning and decision making procedures (NEPA/NFMA) and erupted into biodiversity conservation (spotted owls and old-growth dependent species). The old growth problem will continue evolve because it is a policy debate, changing as public understanding and values change and as scientific knowledge about forests develops. Science can inform the public policy debate, but science cannot resolve it.

In order to solve the old growth problem, methods must be found for society to agree on public forest management goals and objectives. Given the diversity and complexity of our public forests, such agreement is only possible at a local or regional level where people can develop shared understandings of their place and their respective interests and values. Collaborative processes need to be designed to facilitate development of shared visions of what “their” forest should provide and agreement on how to achieve the vision. These collaborations must be freed from the shackles of top-down standardized procedural requirements to enable experimentation, adaptation and learning.

The best guidance for local collaborations may still be Aldo Leopold’s:

“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

The elegance of this basic statement of principle provides clearer direction regarding the “problem” of old growth than any of the statutes, rules and guidelines that have attempted to solve the problem to date.