

Reframing the *Problem* of Old Growth: Seizing the *Opportunity* of Old Growth?

Some thoughts for the NCSSF/PNW Old Growth Workshop

Julia Wondolleck

The University of Michigan

The perspective I have to offer on “the problem of Old Growth” is grounded in an understanding of the origins and characteristics of environmental and natural resource conflicts, as well as an understanding of precursors to their potential resolution. I study how society makes decisions and, in particular, how society makes decisions when confronted with divergent yet legitimate interests. I study intractable environmental conflicts, those that defy resolution. And I have spent considerable time over the past two decades studying these questions in the context of conflict over management of national forests. While I do not explicitly study “the problem of old growth,” it is nonetheless an issue that clearly resides in all of the domains listed above.

From a conflict and dispute resolution perspective, to make sense of the old growth problem one would begin by asking questions such as:

- *Why does this problem exist?* Who cares about old growth, and why do they care about it? What strategies are they using to try to advance their interests on the issue and why have they adopted these strategies over others?
- *Why does this problem persist?* What mechanisms (i.e. policies, processes, organizations) are in place to manage old growth issues, and why are these mechanisms not succeeding? What are the specific challenges impeding resolution of this issue?
- *What might be some alternate approaches to managing this issue?* What are the unique attributes of the old growth issue that need to be considered in developing a response to it? How might the apparent challenges be addressed? How might the issue be reframed in order to potentially reveal new approaches for addressing it?

Using this conflict management lens, here are some summary observations about the nature of the old growth problem:

High Stakes & Divergent yet Legitimate Interests

The old growth problem seems to exist for two main reasons. First, there are high stakes associated with old growth. Consequently, people care passionately about the issue and actively engage in debate over it; nobody is walking away saying “it’s no big deal.” Second, the old growth issue involves divergent yet legitimate interests. In other words, people care about old growth in different ways and for different reasons. It is valued for ecological, economic, spiritual, political, cultural, and ethical reasons, just to name the obvious. Some of these interests are compatible and complimentary, while some are incompatible and conflicting. Regardless, each of these values is legitimate and has currency in the political debate over old growth.

It's Not Just About Old Growth

To further complicate things, “the problem” of old growth isn’t entirely about old growth. This conflict has persisted for so long that other interests and issues have become embedded in it. There is a symbolic dimension to the old growth issue that appears to permeate the objectives of some organizations and individuals involved in the debate. Political and professional norms and identities also seem to be at stake. There also seem to be political power and organizational control undercurrents that further complicate this issue. Unfortunately, conflicts that have spiraled in a way that entangles other seemingly unrelated issues and interests are the most intractable conflicts of all.

Ambiguous Boundaries and Processes

There is considerable ambiguity about society’s priorities and what criteria should guide the public choices that must be made about old growth. In this sense, old growth is a problem of boundaries and processes. Neither the social boundaries of this problem (i.e. the policy parameters), nor the social processes (i.e. the decision-making criteria and procedures), are clear. Boundaries are essential for public issues because it is difficult to make public decisions when the decision space is ambiguous. If what is within and what is outside the decision space is not defined, then conflict is inevitable. Clarity is also needed about what process will be followed, employing what criteria, for making decisions about the management of what resides within the boundaries of the decision space once it is defined. Productive collaboration on this issue cannot occur until these boundaries and processes are clarified.

In Search of the Elusive Definition of Old Growth

People value different dimensions of old growth and define its core elements using different terms with different implications. Consequently, a definition for old growth eludes us. Further refinement and consensus on the ecological definition won’t dispel the fact that other definitions are legitimate and have currency in the debate. However, what an ecological definition will do is enable the scientific community to play a more central role in the political process. In short, reaching consensus on this definition is essential but not sufficient. It’s what happens next that will determine what happens with old growth.

Framing Matters: Is Old Growth a Problem or an Opportunity?

How an issue is framed determines the nature of the discussion that follows and the array of responses imagined. For example, a problem suggests a solution, and a solution suggests finality. But old growth lends itself to neither solutions nor finality because it is both dynamic and multi-dimensional. What if the *problem* of old growth was reframed as the *opportunity* of old growth? Then what might be seen? An opportunity suggests possibilities. Possibilities suggest multiple paths and hope.

Old growth is not a problem that scientists can solve. However, old growth might be an opportunity that scientists can seize. One of the glaring needs highlighted by the old growth debate is the need for more credible and productive engagement of the scientific community. How might scientists play a more active role in informing public understanding of the ecological dimensions of the issue and the inherent tradeoffs in the public choices that might be made and, in so doing, influence policy direction on this issue? In other words, could “the old growth problem” actually be an open door opportunity inviting a more central role for the scientific community to help society make informed decisions about their natural resources, old growth and otherwise?

What might be other ways to frame this issue such that new ideas and discussion might emerge?