

DOVETAIL COMMENTARY

Why do we need International Day of Forests?

March 2013

In 1971, at the request of the European Confederation, the FAO's member governments supported the observance of an annual World Forestry Day on March 21st. That same year, in the United States, a presidential proclamation declared World Forestry Day to be part of a week of activities and ceremonies aimed at celebrating the role of forests in every man's life.[1] Forty years later, 2011 was declared the International Year of Forests as a global celebration of people's action for sustainable forest management.[2]

This year, March 21, 2013 has been proclaimed the first annual International Day of Forests[3] by the United Nations General Assembly; in effect a renewing or rebranding of World Forestry Day. The goal is to continue to raise awareness of the importance of all types of forests. So, why do we need an International Day of Forests? Why are forests so deserving of this global recognition?

First, what is a forest? Well, our first thought of a forest is for trees, trees of all sizes, but especially large ones. However, in general it is fair to say that a typical forest may include large and small trees; conifers or deciduous trees; and seedlings as well as old growth. There are thousands of different species of trees in forests, but trees are not the only living things present. Forests also include a wide variety of plants including flowers, ferns, shrubs, as well as growing fungi, mushrooms, and lichens. Forests also include animals such as mammals, amphibians, and birds – some that just visit and others that stay year-round. But is that all that a forest is – just a combination of its environmental and ecological pieces? No, that is just the beginning.

A forest is also a place that provides abundant and diverse products and services. Forests provide clean water to drink and oxygen to breathe. Forests provide wood for building our homes and communities, and paper for our books and memories. Forests also provide food – berries, nuts, maple syrup – and energy for our bonfires or as biofuels. But, again, is that all that a forest is – a combination of environmental conditions and economic outputs? No, there is still more.

A forest is also a place for people. A place to hunt, fish, hike, camp, and take photographs. It is a place to spend time alone or with friends and family. And a place where we can live or simply where we go to experience, enjoy, and interact with nature.

So, a forest is more than a bunch of trees, or a list of goods, or a set of experiences. Forests are the sum of all of these things. Today, working forests around the world are being sustainably

managed to provide all of these things. Not all forests are or should be actively managed, but where it is appropriate, it is through this management that a full spectrum of what a forest can be is nurtured and sustained.

Our management of forests has not always been ideal as our science and understanding continues to grow. However, if we look at forest management through a historic lens there has been a trend in the Americas of harvest and recovery for hundreds of years. Centuries ago, Mayans cleared forests in Central and South America for farmland and other uses with significant impact to the landscape. Yet, over many centuries, the tropical forests recovered.[4]

Similarly, in the late-1800s, much of the forestland of what is now the eastern United States was harvested and turned into farmland at best, and severely “degraded” land at worst. In fact in 1898 Wisconsin was described as a state in which “...8,000,000 of the 17,000,000 acres of forest are ‘cut over’ lands largely burned over and waste brush lands, and one-half of it as nearly desert as it can become in the climate of Wisconsin.”[5] However, through many public and private actions over the next century, these lands have been nurtured and forests have been restored. Today, Wisconsin has about 16 million acres of forest and one of the nation’s largest forest sector economies. Recovery and renewal are possible.

A forest incorporates many things, including environmental, economic, and social benefits. It also exists across time and over wide spaces, resulting in the fact that it can be a place of change and renewal for the plants, the trees, other wildlife, as well as for people. As we broaden the values we hold for forests and improve our understanding of and ability to restore and manage forests, the sustainability of our forests is enhanced. Awareness of the importance of forests to our current and future needs is part of the knowledge required to ensure that future. And that is a very good reason to celebrate. Happy International Day of Forests.