

Visions for the Long Term

When I was a teenager I took some aptitude tests to develop some general guidance and direction for my life. As part of the evaluation, I found out that everyone has a planning horizon. This is the distance into the future that a person needs to have planned. If they do not have a general idea of where they are going within their horizon, they feel anxious and apprehensive. While one person may need her entire life planned (or even longer), another is satisfied only with knowing where he will be in the next five minutes. Mine turns out to be about five years.

This phenomenon may help to explain why more non-industrial private forest owners (“NIPFO’s”) do not have forest management plans. As we all know, trees live a long time. Forest management, therefore, is a long term operation. Mostly, it is hard for us to see the changes constantly occurring in our forests since the process is so slow. On the one hand, if our forest satisfies us now, we may not notice it changing into a less desirable state until significant changes have occurred. On the other hand, if we want to bring about a different condition in our forest, we may not be able to appreciate the success we are having which is discouraging. Maybe for some people their planning horizon is so much shorter than a rotation of the trees in their forest that they never feel anxious about where their forest is going. This is exacerbated by the short duration of forest ownership in New York, which is about seven years. Even for those who have life long planning horizons, such a time frame still may fall short of the time required to bring about change. In the end, without planning forest owners never articulate the reasons they own the land and what they want to get out of it.

Compare this situation with industrial forest companies and state forests, both of which have perpetual life. They have long planning horizons and tend to take forest planning very seriously. Of course, short-term economic demands can overwhelm even their long-term forest plans.

This is not to say that NIPFO’s do not plan, but merely that management is driven more by specific short-term needs than by long-term “visions” for their forest. *We need firewood, cut some trees. We need to pay bills, cut some trees. We need a road, cut some trees.* The reasons for ownership, the goals and dreams the owners have for the land, are not connected with management decisions. Sometimes the short-term management decisions do not conflict with the reasons for ownership. Unfortunately, some management operations and some ownership goals are so mutually exclusive that landowner have “ruined” their property. They can no longer get what they need from their forest. Had they stated the reasons they own the forest and the vision they have for it, they would have seen the incompatibility of the operation. Then they could have searched for alternatives to their short-term needs. *Buy the firewood. Mortgage the house. Acquire and easement from a neighbor.* At the very least they would have known the tradeoffs between various means.

So, get going! Gather everyone who has an interest in your land (most likely your family) and write down your collective *reasons for ownership* (a retreat and an investment), a *vision* for your property (healthy forest that supports itself, lots of song birds), the *principals* that will guide you to the vision (professional advice, coordinate with neighbors) and the *next steps* to reaching the vision (learn more about forest birds). You probably can fit this onto one page. Be sure to give a copy to your forester.

By the way, the entire country is going through this process, which is why I chose this topic. During the past couple of decades Americans have been splintered into several different camps. Each one is promoting its own vision of what our forests should be. Preservationism. Environmentalism. Conservationism. Wise use. These labels describe just a few. To counteract this situation, the Seventh American Forest Congress will be held in Washington, D.C. in February 1996. It will bring together all the camps to seek common ground. The Congress will develop a vision for America’s forest, the principals needed to guide us to that vision, and the immediate next steps necessary to begin the journey. CFA is a collaborating organization helping to bring local input to the national event by convening a “roundtable” of central New York citizens. If you would like more information about the Congress, please call CFA.

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Catskill Forest Association, Inc.

PO Box 336

Arkville, New York 12406 USA

PH: 845-586-3054

FX: 845-586-4071

cfa@catskill.net

www.catskillforest.org