

These are dueling op-eds on the front of the Perspectives section of the Easter Sunday paper.

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Trees in the Balance

Commentary : State policies fail to address question of sustainability

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From the bottomlands of the Mississippi to the peaks of the Smoky Mountains, the landscape of Tennessee is draped with a complex tapestry of biologically diverse forest ecosystems.

These forests are cherished by the people of this state for the myriad values they provide and for the critical role they have played in Tennessee's rich natural and cultural heritage. Forests provide Tennesseans with timber and wood fiber products, clean water, places to hunt and fish, watershed protection, firewood, maintenance of soil fertility, splendid fall vistas, places for people to live, habitat for thousands of plant and animal species, hiking opportunities and rural tourism.

Unfortunately, the state of Tennessee ignores this complex matrix of forest values when it defines a forest as a "crop" like cotton. The fact of the matter is that we expect far more from a forest than we do from an agricultural field. In order to maintain the ecological goods and services that forests provide, it is necessary to treat forests as complex biological systems.

If these systems are to function properly, their various parts must be kept in good working order. Tracking the ecological integrity, health and sustainability of our forests requires that we have a comprehensive, scientific understanding of forest dynamics and that we develop rigorous processes of forest assessment throughout Tennessee to track forest change.

The protection and sustainability of Tennessee's forests require not only that land-use decisions affecting forests be directed by the best possible science but also that we develop a renewed sense of public and private stewardship and responsibility within the state. Leadership on both of these fronts must begin with state government.

We currently lack a comprehensive forest policy in Tennessee, allowing only the market to control the rate and intensity of timber extraction and forest clearing. Such a situation might be fine if all of our forests were indeed just a crop, but this view of forestry fails to protect the diversity of values that people have come to expect from the state's forests.

Throughout the state, forests are currently being affected by a multitude of changes: urban development, conversion to pine monocultures, air pollution and the invasion of exotic species. Each forest ecosystem in Tennessee is unique, and so are the subregional factors that currently affect these forests.

For example, patterns of landuse change on the Cumberland Plateau are very different from patterns of land-use change in the Mississippi River region of West Tennessee. Statewide generalizations made over 10-year time periods by state government provide

little value to Tennesseans who are concerned about what is happening right now in forests near their back yards.

At the University of the South, we have developed cost-effective ways of tracking forest change in Tennessee using the latest computer mapping technology. When we applied these methods to our back yard, the southern Cumberland Plateau, we identified patterns of forest loss and hardwood conversion to pine that had not been reported previously by any government agency.

The computer mapping and remote sensing technology associated with Geographic Information Systems has dramatically improved our ability to track the pulse of forest change in Tennessee. It is time for state government to step up to the plate and begin to take advantage of this technology for this purpose.

Also at the University of the South, we are experimenting with well-known forestry techniques involving selective harvesting methods that allow for wood extraction while minimizing the ecological impact on the forest. In Tennessee, the promotion of clearcutting as the best silvicultural option ignores the tremendous ecological consequences that this activity can have on a landscape scale. As Dr. Daniel Simberloff, a professor of ecology at the University of Tennessee, pointed out in his recent testimony to the state legislature: Clear-cutting is not simply an aesthetic problem (as Tennessee Department of Agriculture officials argue) but a serious ecological concern that can have major consequences for species habitats when applied to vast acreages.

On the southern Cumberland Plateau, industrial-scale clear-cutting and subsequent conversion of native hardwood forest to pine plantations has potentially resulted in significant declines in nongame wildlife habitat, streamwater quality and soil fertility. Unfortunately, there are no biologists employed by the Tennessee Division of Forestry, the agency assigned the responsibility of overseeing the sustainability of the state's forests, and landscape-level ecological effects on forests, such as are occurring on the Cumberland Plateau, are not being assessed by state government.

Leadership is needed within state government to develop a progressive forestry policy that is premised on the understanding that our forests are complex biological systems. Such a forest policy must be developed using the best possible science and should take advantage of recent advances in technology to track changes and monitor forest conditions. Because each part of the state has its own unique set of problems regarding forest change and loss, we need a progressive forest policy that reflects the fact that land-use decision-making and forest sustainability is a local issue.

This policy should recognize that small, resident landowners in Tennessee are typically not responsible for the major changes to forests occurring across the landscape at present. We need a progressive forest policy that employs both a carrot and a stick approach: establishing an effective set of enforceable regulations that ensure proper forest stewardship while protecting private property rights, and offering a creative array of incentives that foster protection of public values. We need a progressive forest policy that encourages and promotes forest sustainability as a vital part of economic rejuvenation programs in rural counties.

Finally, we need state natural resource agencies empowered with the appropriate personnel and policies so that state government can effectively promote the ecological values of Tennessee's forests.

We are at a crossroads in Tennessee. Profitable forestry practices and the protection of ecological values can go hand in hand if we work together within the state to make this happen.

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Commentary : Clear-cutting a sensible part of forestry in Tennessee

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Members of the Tennessee Forestry Association, the association of forestry professionals, landowners and loggers across Tennessee, have followed with interest a number of recent articles in this newspaper and others exploring forestry concerns in the state. At issue are claims and characterizations stemming from campaigns by national environmental activist groups targeting forestry practices on the Cumberland Plateau and naming the area an "endangered biogem."

The Tennessee Forestry Association says enough is enough and would like to set the record straight on what is actually occurring on the Cumberland Plateau.

First, it is important to know that the Cumberland Plateau forests have been inaccurately designated "endangered" as a scare tactic. Environmental groups have designated it. Not the government. Not the forestry associations. And not the more mainstream conservation groups.

In truth, the forests of the Cumberland Plateau are rich, dense and healthy. According to a variety of major studies by federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Forest Service, TVA, the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the balance of hardwoods in the forests is strong, and urban development and encroachment — not harvesting — are the largest threats to our precious forests.

An additional extensive analysis by the Tennessee Forestry Commission states that 90 percent of Tennessee's forest resources is composed of hardwood forest types and further determined that public concerns over excessive harvesting were simply "unfounded" and required no further action by officials.

Second, extensive areas of the Cumberland Plateau have been heavily damaged by a recent pine beetle infestation. The Tennessee Forestry Association understands that landowners are burdened with harvesting and removing dead

and damaged trees at the same time they are nurturing their healthy stands. Tennessee's most recent pine beetle infestation was the worst in the state's history and shouldn't be ignored — or mischaracterized.

Lastly, some environmentalist groups have introduced yet another round of legislation in Tennessee's General Assembly this year aimed at restricting or eliminating certain forestry practices, particularly clear-cutting. A House subcommittee heard testimony recently from a number of environmentalists who characterized clear-cuts as producing the most drastic habitat changes imaginable.

If that were the case, then 100-plus years of clear-cutting in Tennessee should have left the area devoid of precious animal and wildlife habitats. That is clearly not the case, as Cumberland Plateau forests continue to enjoy some of the most diverse wildlife habitats in the country.

Environmentalists also have cited Tennessee's waterways as being endangered by clear-cutting and irresponsible forestry practices. Yet the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation presented testimony in a Senate Committee recently stating that only 15 miles of the state's 60,000 miles of rivers, streams and tributaries have been adversely affected by the runoff caused by improper clear-cutting. TDEC, whose responsibility it is to protect the health of those waterways, has done a thorough job monitoring forest practices that affect those streams and rivers and reports adverse affects of clear-cutting on rivers to be minimal.

Interestingly, Patrick Moore, co-founder of a leading environmental activist group, Greenpeace, recently pointed to the unfair characterization of clearcutting as a damaging forestry practice. "Just because a clearcut forest doesn't look like a postcard picture, people think that it's environmentally harmful, but that's not true," news reports quoted Moore as saying at a forests and wildlife conference in Pennsylvania.

He pointed to urban sprawl and agriculture as far more threatening to forests than the practice of clear-cutting. In fact, Moore said, it is in the best interests of timber companies to protect and reforest the woodlands so that forestry can be a boon to the economy, community and environment. And if people don't use wood products, they are likely using metal and concrete, which come from nonrenewable resources, use far more energy to produce and harm the environment more.

The Tennessee Forestry Association understands the value of all responsible harvesting methods, including clear-cutting, as appropriate and useful tools when conducted wisely. We also acknowledge the negative impacts of clear-cuts and other procedures implemented without using best management practices and trained loggers. That distinction is at the root of the association's support of a

stringent set of timber harvesting standards called Sustainable Forestry Initiative, as well as the organization's own Master Logger Program.

Bottom line: We know that forests thrive only when they are nurtured and appropriately managed. Anything less hurts us all.

While it may be an effective fund-raising tool for environmental activist groups to create annually a new endangered designation in our country, it does Tennesseans a disservice to devalue the Cumberland Plateau's forests, an area that is of such great pride to all of us. We encourage all Tennesseans to learn the real facts about Tennessee's woodlands, take pride in our forests and join us in being responsible caretakers.

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