

EDITORIAL

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Sawed-off ecosystems

Cutting trees is big business, and the Southeastern United States has become a prime target of the timber crowd.

But the timber business could cost the Cumberland Plateau far more than just trees. The practice of clear-cutting adversely affects ecosystems in those forests. In many cases, it threatens species' existence in the region.

Environmentalists have made headway in recent years in getting corporate customers to recognize the harm to the environment involved when they buy wood products. They are encouraged, with some success, to stock up responsibly. The moves include companies such as Staples and Office Depot purchasing more recycled paper. And, yes, the issue applies to newspapers, which has a duty to use recycled products.

But good intentions by some companies are just part of the issue. The tree-cutters have to be more responsible, and state and federal government should place strict regulations on trimming forests.

One of the oldest arguments the timber industry makes to support clear-cutting is that the practice replaces old trees with young ones. But that ignores the fact that clear-cutting replaces hardwoods, which are naturally part of an ecosystem, with pine trees, which are not. Hardwoods such as oak and hickory work in nature in ways that sustain and nurture various species of life. Pine doesn't do the same, and life in those ecosystems is the worse for it. The environment suffers.

Fortunately, some good corporate citizens are stepping up to the plate and should be recognized for their responsible actions toward the environment. But the real focus has to be on limiting the cutting of hardwoods. Tennessee has always been able to brag about its abundant natural resources. If managed responsibly, future generations will have the same right to brag. If squandered, the natural resources will be left to history books.