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David B. Field

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Academia in the Northern Forest Lands debate: Research versus chronic brushfires

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by David B. Field

Introduction

It was early morning in late September, 1993. Members of the Citizen's Advisory Committee of Maine's delegation to the Northern Forest Lands Council sat in the common room of Bradford's sporting camps on Munsungan Lake, deep in the Maine woods. The agenda called for discussion of the "Findings and Options" just issued by the Northern Forest Lands Council. A citizen spoke: "This recommendation is for research that should have been done long ago. Why hasn't this been done at the University of Maine? What are they doing there, anyway?"

Academia. An environment where researchers can take the long view. A place where intellectual freedom and sympathetic funding sources combine to enable studies that need not justify an action already taken or that need not even have an obvious immediate application. Yet, the public service mission of a land-grant university demands some ability to respond to needs for information that are difficult to anticipate far in advance. Framing a research agenda that balances long-term basic and applied research with the flexibility that is essential to coping with unexpected political brushfires is a constant challenge. Anticipating probable conflagrations is fundamental to success.

This article uses the prominent Northern Forest Lands debate as a case study for examining contributions of academicians to policy formation.

Evolution of the issue

As brushfires go, the Northern Forest Lands issue evolved slowly. The spark was set long before public concern led to political response. In April, 1978, Goldman Sachs Investment Research issued a report by analyst Thomas P. Clephane entitled "Timber Survey: Ownership, Valuation, and Consumption Analysis for 57 Forest Product and Paper Companies." During 1978, Clephane published articles in *Forest Industries* and *Pulp and Paper* magazines on the importance of timber holdings to forest products companies. In June, 1980, Clephane (then Vice President of the investment firm Morgan Stanley) co-authored a 94-page report, "Timber ownership, valuation, and consumption analysis for 87 forest products, paper, and diversified companies." The key findings in this paper:

Our analysis indicates that timber is a significantly undervalued asset relative to present stock prices and stated book values. Eighteen of the 22 largest forest products and paper companies have an estimated timber value per share in excess of the present stock price.... Crown

Zellerbach and Longview Fibre have...estimated timber values that are 2.7-3.0 times the current stock price....Weyerhaeuser, International Paper, Potlatch, Pacific Lumber, and Willamette own timber with estimated values between 2.2 and 2.4 times the present price of their stock.

Note that these multiples were for timber alone, not counting mills and other assets. In November, 1980, Clephane published an article that emphasized the timber valuations of the top 15 forest products companies in the U.S. This was followed (by a paper entitled, "Timber: Even non-industry investors realize its value" Clephane and Carroll 1981).

In December, 1982, one such investor, British financier Sir James Goldsmith, acquired the Diamond International Corporation and its 1.7 million acres of forest land in a \$660 million hostile takeover. Goldsmith moved quickly to liquidate Diamond's factories, but kept most of the timberland, including some 800,000 acres in Maine, which had an estimated worth of \$723 million (Boucher 1989) . Despite retaining the land, Goldsmith earned back almost 90 percent of his investment in eight months.

A second large block of Maine land was also sold in the 1980s. During the nineteenth century, Eleazer Coburn and his sons (one of whom became Governor of Maine) had acquired 250,000 acres of forest land in Maine. In 1916, the lands were partitioned among the heirs. Eighty thousand acres came under the ownership of the Coburn Lands Trust. In the early 1980s, there were no longer any Coburn heirs living in Maine. The trust decided to sell the lands. Lands in Upper Enchanted Township and on Moosehead Lake were subjected to intensive subdivision. Lands in Attean Township were placed under a conservation easement donated by the Trust to the Forest Society of Maine in 1984. In 1987, the Attean lands were purchased by Lowell & Company Timber Associates of Boston, subject to the conservation easements, and placed under a multiple-use management plan.

In February, 1988, James Goldsmith spun off the Diamond lands to a French holding company, in which he had a controlling interest, and instructed the company to put the lands on the sales block. Ninety thousand acres of land in New Hampshire and Vermont were offered for sale for \$19 million (\$212/acre). New Hampshire Governor John Sununu influenced Goldsmith to split off the 67,000 acres in New Hampshire, which Goldsmith offered for \$14 million (\$212/acre). The state backed off at this price. In May, a group of Nashua, New Hampshire-based developers (Rancourt Associates) bought all 90,000 acres that Goldsmith had put up for sale in northern Vermont and New Hampshire at \$212/acre.

The Rancourt transaction was probably the detonator for an explosion of public concern over the development of the North Woods that had been building for some time. The immediate focus of concern was the Nash Stream watershed, just north of the Kilkenny Unit of the White Mountain National Forest. In July, 1988, reacting to the public outcry, the State of New Hampshire agreed to buy the 45,000-acre Nash Stream watershed from Rancourt at \$282.50/acre. About one-third of the payment made by New Hampshire was federal money, justified by an easement wherein the State sold the development rights on the land to the federal government.

In July, 1988, Maine Audubon's journal Habitat presented a special issue on the forests of Maine. That same summer, Wilderness, the journal of the Wilderness Society, published an

article by George Wuerthner, "Northeast Kingdoms: Is it time to rescue the last of New England's wilderness?" In March, 1989, in Portland, Maine, Wilderness Society President George Frampton unveiled the Society's proposal for "A New Maine Woods Reserve" (Kellett, 1989) to a joint meeting of the New England Society of American Foresters and The Wildlife Society. The proposal called for a multiple-use, multi-owner area with roughly the same location and configuration as the "Maine Woods National Park" described in Wuerthner's 1988 article.

Public concern over the development pressures suggested by the Diamond and Coburn land sales culminated, in September 1988, with passage by Congress of Public Law 100-446. The law directed the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service to study the timberland resources in northern New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, and to identify and assess: (1) forest resources, including timber, fish and wildlife, lakes and rivers, and recreation; (2) historical land-ownership patterns and projected future land-ownership, management, and use; (3) the likely impacts of changes in land and resource ownership, management, and use patterns; and (4) alternative strategies to protect the long-term integrity and traditional uses of land (Harper, Falk, and Rankin, 1990).

Work on examination of these 26 million acres began in October, 1988. At the same time, a "Governors' Task Force", with three members appointed by the governors of each of the four states, began meeting to consider the issues.

The Forest Service issued its report in April, 1990. Shortly thereafter, the Governors' Task Force issued its own action plan (Governors' Task Force, 1990), which called for the establishment of a "Northern Forest Lands Council" to continue the work of the Task Force for another four years. The recommendation included \$10,000,000 for contract research to gather information pertinent to Northern Forest Lands questions. The Congress and the states supported the creation of the Council.

The Northern Forest Lands Council

The Northern Forest Lands Council consists of four representatives each from Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont. A professional staff, based in Concord, New Hampshire, is supported by field coordinators in each of the four states. Upon its creation, the Council was directed to find ways "to reinforce the traditional patterns of land ownership and uses of large forest areas in the Northern Forests of Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont, which have characterized these lands for decades." More specifically, the Council was asked to accomplish this mission by:

Enhancing the quality of life for local residents through the promotion of economic stability for the people and communities of the area and through the maintenance of large forest areas;
Encouraging the production of a sustainable yield of forest products; and

Protecting recreational, wildlife, scenic, and wildland resources.

Early in its existence, the Northern Forest Lands Council focused its attention on seven issues that it considered "most significant from a regional, multi-state perspective": (1) biological

resources, (2) conservation strategies, (3) land conversion trends, (4) aspects of local, forest-based economies, (5) property taxes, (6) recreation and tourism, and (7) state and federal taxes. Following its Congressional mandate and its belief that such matters are best left to individual states, the Council explicitly chose not to address issues of forest practices, business regulation, effects of climate change, acid deposition, forest health, and labor costs.

The Council intends to end its work with recommendations for public policy changes to the Congress, governors, legislatures, and local governments. The organization will disband in September, 1994.

The continuing public debate

Creation of the Northern Forest Lands Council caused little reduction in the public debate over the disposition of the 26 million acre study region. National and regional environmental organizations were particularly active. A 1991 issue of *Backpacker* magazine included a Timberlands® boots advertisement that featured a letter by the Wilderness Society's Maine Woods Project Director Jym St. Pierre, promoting the 1989 Maine Woods Reserve proposal. The September, 1991 issue of *Appalachia*, the bulletin of the Appalachian Mountain club, presented the Club's first annual report on the Northern Forest. The AMC's fund-raising brochure for that year included an appeal for money to support protection of the "26,000,000 acres of the northern forest lands that are threatened with imminent development." In October, the National Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club, and The Wilderness Society issued a white paper: "Saving the Northern Forest: An Issue of National Importance." The fall of 1992 saw the introduction of "The Northern Forest Forum," a rather militant environmental journal devoted to covering issues of importance to the northern Appalachians. In September, 1993, the Appalachian Mountain Club, the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, and the Maine Audubon Society published "An Inventory and Ranking of the Key Resources of the Northern Forest Lands of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine," which was based on research done independently of the Northern Forest Lands Council.

Popular media continued to play a prominent role in informing the public about the issues. For example, in Maine alone, the June, 1991, *Downeast* magazine featured two articles under the cover heading, "The late, great Maine north woods?" July found a *Bangor Daily News* account of a tumultuous public hearing in Bangor over a proposed Northern Forest Lands Act at which private property rights activists confronted U.S. Senators Mitchell, Cohen, and Fowler. This was followed in August by a *Maine Times* special issue: "Battle for the Northern Forest," which was echoed in the July, 1992 *Bangor Daily News* feature "Battle for the Maine Woods." In September, *Yankee* magazine published "The last big place: The uncertain future of the north woods."

Northern Forest Lands Council research

The Northern Forest Lands Council needed information about the issues. Basic facts and credible analysis were essential to its goal of publishing draft recommendations by late 1993. The momentum of the public debate and the Council's own limited life span favored syntheses of existing knowledge over long-term investigations. Subcommittees based on the seven

"significant issues" worked with the Council's staff to solicit proposals and award contracts for research.

The Request for Proposals for the property taxes study was indicative of the depth of information sought by the Council and the time pressure under which it labored. The successful bidder was to "gather information on current use taxation and assessment programs, and the societal costs, benefits and alternatives to these programs..." The core of the study was to "examine in detail the societal costs and benefits of...current use taxation and assessment programs, including implications for landowners, governments, the forest-based economy, the environment and land use" on an individual state basis. The draft report was to be submitted within four months of the signing of the contract.

The contract for a literature review and briefing paper dealing with outdoor forest-based recreation and tourism in the Northern Forest Lands region called for a draft report to be delivered within one month. The final report was due ten days after the contractor received comments from the Council.

Most of the research was carried out by private consulting firms, primarily through collection and analysis of secondary data. The major primary data effort was the development of a land-transaction data base by the James W. Sewall Company as part of the Land Conversion study (Sewall Company 1993a). In addition to the individual studies, the subcommittees also organized a number of forums at which experts were gathered to inform subcommittee members directly about topics of interest.

In September, 1993, the Northern Forest Lands Council published its "Findings and Options for Public Policy Changes Affecting the 26 Million Acre Northern Forest of Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont." Although some organizations remained disappointed with the scope of the Council's investigations, the report received rather widespread support for its inclusiveness and objectivity. The Council's draft recommendations are expected in early 1994, with a final draft to be forwarded to the Congress and the state governors in May of 1994.

The role(s) of academia

Where was Academia while all of this was going on? The Northern Forest Lands debate has stimulated some long-term research, research that will enable society to better cope in the future with these issues. In the short term, academicians from the region have supported the work of the Northern Forest Lands Council by serving on regional citizens' advisory committees and on Council working groups, by providing information to non-academic study contractors, by providing contract services, by participating in workshops, and by providing expert testimony. A number of academicians were involved directly in the preparation of research reports for the Council.

The concern of academicians was also reflected in their professional meetings and conferences. In May, 1989, the New England Natural Resources Center, the Northern Forest Lands Study (USDA Forest Service), the Wild Wings Foundation, and the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies sponsored a conference in Durham, NH: "Strategies for Forest Lands:

The Public Private Interface in Northern New England and New York." The proceedings (Binkley and Hagenstein 1989) provided important information for the Northern Forest Lands Study (Harper, Falk, and Rankin 1990) and for later Northern Forest Lands deliberations. In October, 1992, the University of Maine's Forest Resources Policy Analysis Group sponsored the First Munsungan Conference. The meeting focused on public recreational use of private forest lands in Maine (Murdoch and Stone 1993). In November, 1992, the Wilderness Society and the George D. Aiken Lecture Series at the University of Vermont presented the conference "Sustaining Ecosystems, Economies, and a Way of Life in the Northern Forest." At the March, 1993, meeting of the New England Society of American Foresters, Field and Howe (1993) and Dennis and Field (1993) presented information on regional economic impacts of disturbances to existing Northern Forest Lands circumstances that might result from policy decisions that affect the forestry sector of the region. Walter Aikman (1993), from the State University of New York at Syracuse spoke on the impacts of new social movements that have arisen in response to the Northern Forest Lands debate.

Perhaps the greatest single body of research data that was missing, at a time when it was most badly needed, was that on the status of the forest resource itself. Fifty-eight percent of the study area is in Maine. The last "decennial survey" of Maine's forest resources conducted by the U. S. Forest Service was completed in 1982 and reported in 1984. Field work for the next survey will not begin until the spring of 1994, with reported results expected in 1997. Facing this delay in information, the State of Maine contracted with the James W. Sewall Co. and the University of Maine in 1989 to prepare an interim forest survey, and also to study potential methodology for performing interim, broad-scale inventories quickly and inexpensively (Sewall Company 1993b).

Conclusion

In a sense, the whole Northern Forest Lands debate has been a "brushfire" from the academic perspective. The Northern Forest Lands Council needed information quickly to maintain momentum, credibility, and support. The traditional academic research model (graduate students, long-term perspectives, carefully refereed work, and so on) is poorly designed to cope with this. Most of the Council's study contract work went to those consultants who were both capable of doing the work and prepared to act quickly. This comes as no great surprise. As the current health care debate illustrates, few policy issues generate enough public/political interest to demand attention until they have reached crisis proportions.

It has often been noted that universities, unlike private industry and some governmental research units, can take the long view and can embark on research that need not pay off within a calendar quarter or a few years. Yet, this is only one interpretation of "long view." "Long-term" research also means research whose completion may take little time, but that focuses on a long-term perspective, that looks beyond the issues of the day in an attempt to anticipate those of the future, and that deals with actions that will have long-term effects. These long-term questions are the rule, rather than the exception, when dealing with forest resources policy.

In retrospect, academia has served usefully in contributing towards understanding of facts and issues related to the Northern Forest Lands debate. Academics have been important resources for policy makers and have been able to contribute knowledge based on prior research and

experiences. The contribution would have been greater had the research foresight been clearer. The challenge is to anticipate better the broad information needs, so results will be available in time to be useful. That task includes cultivating decision-makers who understand the long view and motivating research funding sources to recognize needs before brushfires erupt and answers are needed yesterday.

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David B. Field is the E. L. Giddings Professor of Forest Policy, Department of Forest Management, University of Maine.

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