

Wild Forests and Landscape Amnesia

BY GEORGE WUERTHNER

In most of Vermont the forest cover is nearly continuous. The Green Mountains are indeed green due to the heavy forest cover. At one point in time, however, the vistas were more pastoral; most of Vermont's hills were stripped of trees and converted into farms and pastures. Estimates suggest that up to 85% of the state was converted to farms. Even the trees on the highest and rockiest slopes were cut for timber, firewood, and charcoal, leaving only a few small (often less than a hundred acres in size) scattered tracts of virgin old growth forest in the state.

However, with the opening of the deep fertile soils of the Midwest to settlement, those interested in farming began to leave the rocky soils of the state behind. At first only the highest, least productive farms were abandoned, and converted back to forest. Over time, many of the lower elevation forests were given back to the trees as well, so that today, farming only survives in Vermont on the best soils—primarily along the river bottomlands and gentle hills.

Despite the continuous forest cover, when I walk through these New England woodlands, I see an ecologically wounded and scarred landscape. One obvious difference is a loss of structural diversity that is characteristic of unlogged forests. In Vermont's relatively young forest stands there is an obvious deficiency of big trees (see figure 1). In presettlement forests, disturbance was rare, and usually consisted of the death and/or toppling of an individual tree or small



George Wuerthner getting ready to ford the Dietrich River tributary of the Middle Fork Koyuk in the Gates of the Arctic National Park, AK. Photo courtesy of George Wuerthner.

groups of trees. Even the clearing of forests by Native Americans was concentrated in small patches near their villages. As a consequence, the vast majority of forested stands had older trees.

The trees that dominate Vermont's forests today are mere sticks and ghosts of the past glory. Ironically the largest individual trees I see in Vermont and elsewhere in New England now grace the yards of old farmhouses or urban parks where logging and/or farming hasn't occurred for centuries. Other indications of a sick, though perhaps not mortally wounded landscape, includes the lack of big old snags in the forest, limited numbers of large fallen logs on the forest floor (see figure 2), reduced microtopographic relief created when large tree root masses have been pulled from the ground when trees fall in storms to create a pit and



Figure 1—A hiker by an old growth white ash tree in Battell Old Growth area in the Green Mountains, Vermont. Photo by George Wuerthner.

mound topography, and a general shortage of big logs in streams.

Most Vermonters now believe that their forests are “recovered.” In fact, some are worried that the forests are declining in health. I recently attended one public meeting convened to discuss the future of the state’s woodlands where person after person advocated more management of the forests. Finally one man stood up and began to express his views. He started by asserting that Vermont’s forests were facing an “old growth crisis.” *Ah*, I thought to myself, *finally someone who understands the real problem*. But he disappointed me when he went on to rant that the real problem with Vermont’s forests is that the trees were getting too old. Too many trees, he said, were “overmature” and “decadent.”

Landscape Amnesia

One of the problems for those of us advocating wild forests is that in many places people have lost the contextual framework to appreciate and view an unmanaged forest. One could call this “landscape amnesia.”

In New England, I see references to the glories of the “working forest” coming not only from the timber companies and their supporters, but even many environmental organizations. Many of these folks believe that Vermont’s forests are “recovered.” Few have sought out the remaining small parcels of old growth virgin forest stands (see figure 3), for if they had, they would no longer believe the myth of the working forest. They would at least realize that the working forest isn’t working ecologically.

This is why some of the points of reference we find in wilderness are so important. In the East, the forests were so thoroughly harvested that we have few “controls” by which we can compare the unmanipulated landscape with lands that are managed.



Figure 2—Decomposing fallen tree in old growth forest of Gifford Woods State Park, Vermont. Photo by George Wuerthner.

Wilderness, or “self-willed lands,” provides the point of reference for natural landscapes and is perhaps one of its greatest values. I suspect that one reason extractive industries so often oppose wilderness designation is, in part, related to the fear that the more people see unlogged forests, the less tolerance they will have for the ecologically depauperate landscapes found in managed lands.

In the western United States, people are willing to lie down in front of logging trucks and chain themselves to trees, in part because they recognize immediately what is being lost when the forest is logged. In the East, people seem more compliant and willing to accept logging as something that may be messy for the moment, but that has no long-term ecological consequences. Anyone who has visited a truly wild forest would not believe such a thing for a moment.

Wilderness designation, along with national park designation, are among the best ways to preserve forest ecosystems—including the ecological processes that shape such forests, such

as wildfire, insect attacks, windstorms, droughts, floods, and whatever else affects the landscape in any particular area (see figure 4). In the West, we still have large chunks of roadless lands that need protection that could be afforded by recent legislative proposals such as the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act, Mount Hood Wilderness proposal, Utah’s Red Rock Canyons proposal, and others. These landscape-scale wilderness designations would ensure that westerners



Figure 3—A hiker stands by old growth white pine in Cambridge Pines area, Cambridge, Vermont. Photo by George Wuerthner.



Figure 4—Hiker among old growth Douglas fir forest in the Salmon Huckleberry Wilderness, Oregon. Photo by George Wuerthner.

don't fall prey to the folly so pervasive in the East, where almost everyone thinks that humans are intelligent enough, and even more importantly, wise enough to manage forest ecosystems. Anyone who has spent a lot of time in wild places knows such assertions are pure human arrogance.

One of the great attractions of the West for me is that we have wild places that act as a constant reminder of how natural ecosystems function. Even though all are under some degree of threat from human impacts such as global warming, they remain the best measure we have for comparing how the human influence does or does not affect landscapes. They provide not only an ecological reference point, but also inspiration. I only hope that Americans and their representatives in Congress finally have the insight and humility to set aside the remaining

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chunks of wildlands as congressionally designated wilderness so that we always have these places to learn and seek wisdom (see figure 5). IJW

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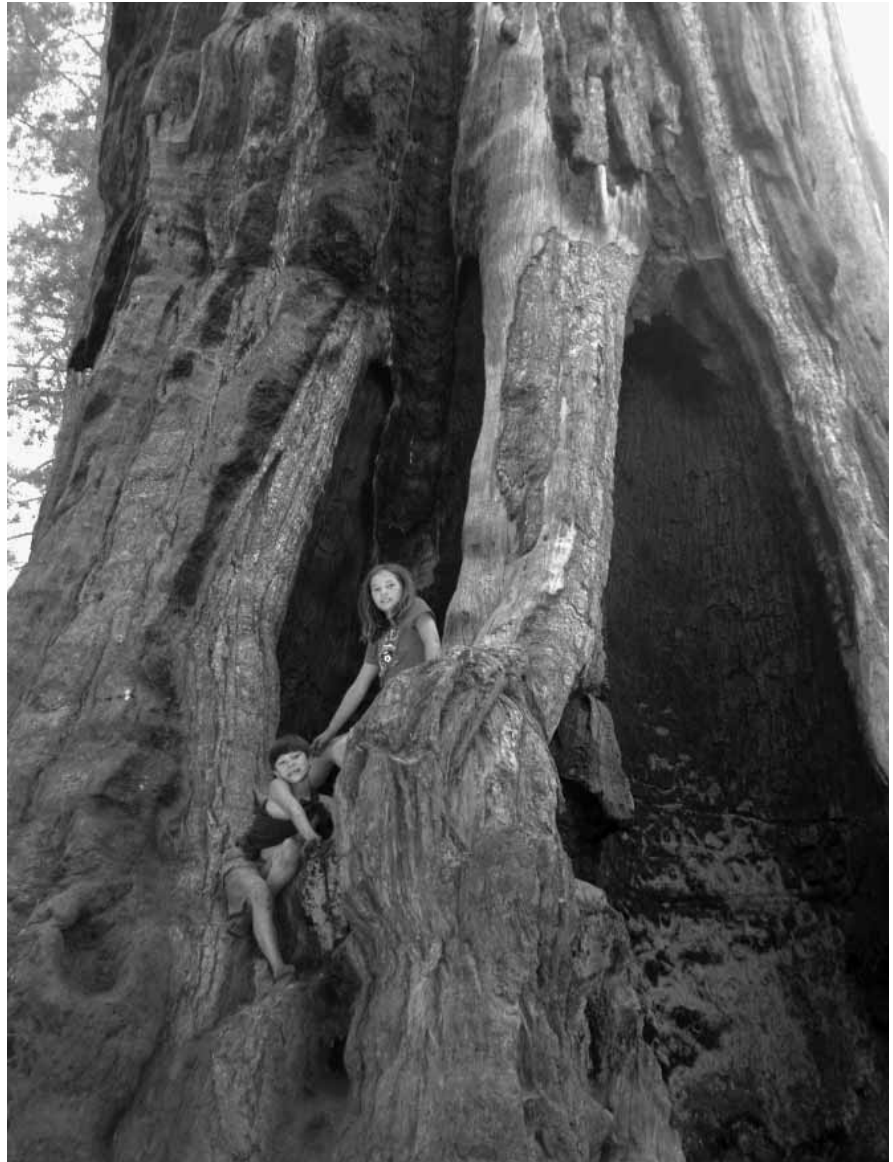


Figure 5—Children climbing on a giant sequoia tree. Photo by George Wuerthner.



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