

Forest Sustainability - What are We Talking About?

"Sustainability: A state or process that can be maintained indefinitely. The principles of sustainability integrate three closely interlined elements-the environment, the economy and the social system-into a system that can be maintained in a healthy state indefinitely."

From Glossary of Forestry Terms, British Columbia Forest Service

The words sustainable forest or sustained yield comes to us from foresters of the 18th and 19th century in Europe. At the time, much of Europe was being deforested, and foresters became increasingly concerned since wood was one of the driving forces in the European economy. Wood heated homes, became homes and factories, was turned into furniture and other articles of manufacture, and the forests that provided the wood were central to economic security. The idea of sustainability became popular and the idea was brought to the United States to be popularized by foresters to include Fernow, Pinchot and Schenck.

Modern efforts to define sustainable development and sustainable forest management have met with confusion and argument. A debate over criteria and indicators to be used to measure forest sustainability is at the heart of the issue. Any attempt to define sustainability in a sentence, or a paragraph, or even several pages can be limiting. I think you will see the complexity of the issue if you study the links provided.

One answer to sustainability is the Smart Wood Program, a center-piece for forest certification. It was one of the first programs to address the economic factor as a function of sustainability. Forest certification has proponents worldwide.

Forest certification is based on the principle of sustainability. Unsustainable forest management is causing "massive soil erosion and biodiversity loss, as well as negatively effecting the economic future of many communities around the globe, especially in the Tropics" according to Smart Wood. They claim other harms to include reducing the world's oxygen supply.

Smart Wood does promote timber production. When managed effectively, this system claims to maintain the long-term viability of commercial forests, protects biodiversity, and provides a continuous stream of social and economic benefits. Because timber markets largely dictate forestry practices, Smart Wood has created economic incentives to achieve and maintain high standards for forest management worldwide.

One such forest belongs to the Menominee Indian Nation in Wisconsin. Over the last 140 years the Menominee have removed two billion board feet of lumber. Even so, the volume of sawtimber now is greater than in 1854 when the Wolf River Treaty created the present Menominee Reservation. They are a prime example that human benefits can provide a sustainable forest.

The American Forest and Paper Association (AF&PA) represents the North American industrial attempt to deal with sustainability. They have an alternative approach that may be a bit more realistic for North America.

A collection of sustainable forestry principles, called the Sustained Forestry Initiative (SFI), have been developed by the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA). Their objective is to achieve a much broader practice of sustainable forestry throughout the United States without higher cost to the consumer. The AF&PA membership is primarily forest industry and their concern is economic based.

They conclude that "Sustainable forestry is a dynamic concept that will evolve with experience. New knowledge provided through research will be used. AF&PA views their Principles and Implementation Guidelines as another step in the evolution of United States industrial forestry practices. Through this step AF&PA members seek to meet the needs of humanity for essential wood and paper products while protecting and enhancing other forest resource values."