

**Northern Forest Forum Reflections**  
**by Mitch Lansky**  
**January 2022**

I live surrounded by industrial forests. I can see what industrial scale mechanization has done to the woods and I can view USDA Forest Service statistics that verify what I am seeing. I've worked in the woods, cutting and piling four foot pulpwood as well as cutting and milling lumber for our own projects. I was a witness to the strike of the Maine Woodsmen Association, for more rights for loggers, back in the 70s. I've participated in town government, from being on boards to being town manager. I have witnessed rural poverty and imbalances of power. I fought against the subsidized spraying, with broad spectrum chemical insecticides, of millions of acres of forest.

No matter what the big companies did, their spokespeople assured the public that it was good for the forest, good for workers, good for local communities, and good for the future. In 1992, 30 years ago, I wrote a book, *Beyond the Beauty Strip*, questioning the "happy coincidence" of the supposed benign results of industrial management of the Maine woods.

During the same period, a multi-state initiative, the Northern Forest Lands Council, was convened to deal with the anticipated sales of millions of acres of woodlands in this four state region. I noticed that the logic of the NFLC was an extension of the "happy coincidence" logic that I discussed in my book. This multi-governmental council was searching for "solutions" to the threat of breaking up of large ownerships using the same mode of thinking that created the problem in the first place.

Senators Patrick Leahy (of Vermont) and Warren Rudman (of New Hampshire) stated the first premise of the logic that the NFLC followed: "The current land ownership and management patterns have served the people and forests of the region well."

The remedies generated from this premise were for such things as purchase of development easements to "protect," "preserve," or "conserve" not forest ecosystems, but "working forests." Also discussed were various tax "incentives" to prevent the "fragmentation," not of forest ecosystems, but of large ownerships.

An unstated goal was to make the economics of ownership of timberlands by big landowners more profitable. We were not supposed to discuss forest practices or the impacts of forestry.

Because I was an author, I was invited to be on the "Citizen's Committee" of the NFLC. Because I had concerns about both the impacts of industrial management to local communities and to biodiversity, I was invited to be a writer for the Northern Forest Forum.

Jamie Sayen, the *Northern Forest Forum* founder, urged that I not only criticize the direction of the NFLC from an ecological perspective, but to also come up with alternatives. I was, at the time, working with a group of loggers, landowners, and foresters developing Low-Impact Forestry: forestry as if the future mattered. So I gave it a try. The least I could do would be to bear witness, even if my contributions did not lead to changes in direction.

Two decades after the ten-year run of the *Forum* ended, readers have a chance to see how things turned out. Did big working forest easements lead to better forest practices? Did certification of millions of acres of forest as "sustainable" prevent industrial landowners from cutting more than growth during the

1990s up until 2008 (when we had a major recession)? Did forest and mill policies in the 90s prevent the closure of paper mills in the new millennium? Did corporate ownership of land lead to thriving communities or to a local economic collapse?

Having access to the *Forums* is a chance to see history debated while it unfolds. The Harvard Forest has done us a favor to make these *Forums* available to a new generation. If the future matters, we cannot continue the absurd quest of infinite growth of wood commodity extraction from forests that have limits. As Confucius said, “if we do not change our direction, we’ll wind up where we are headed.”