



FRANCES JETTER

TREES ARE US

Forest Gump:

"A forest is like a box of chocolates... You eat it all up."

~JACK OHMAN

Two years ago a newly installed American President, Bill Clinton, hosted a conference about forests the day after April Fool's in Portland, Oregon. Almost everyone was given a chance to present a position and seemed grateful to the point of fawning for the opportunity to speak to the President of the United States about why or why not the remaining ancient forests should be preserved or cut down.

Less than 10% of old growth timber remains in the Pacific Northwest, which includes northern California as well as Washington and Oregon in the United States and British Columbia in Canada. Though the forests of BC are intensely logged they are not within U.S. jurisdiction even though a vital part of the ecosystem under discussion.

The economy of the Northwest is largely based on timber products and has been assailed with court injunctions against clearcutting public forests despite a badly compromised and unpopular plan the Clinton Administration attempts to put in place as an aftermath to the Portland forestry conference. The problems and complexity pertaining to forest use focus on employment, endangered species, shrinking habitat, land erosion and water pollution, disastrous fires that consume hundreds of thousands of acres each season and kill animals and firefighters, climate change, methods and extent of logging (especially clearcutting of remaining old growth forests), access and use of public forestlands.

We read and hear about the massive destruction of the rainforests of Asia and South America, yet somehow find it difficult to equate with our own clearcutting of forests in this country. The great North American forest has virtually disappeared in little more than two centuries, from the East Coast to the Pacific Ocean - from the great conifer forests of the North to the hardwoods of the South, in particular a huge swath across the top of the nation from Maine to Oregon.

Little is left of Oregon's old forests and the forests of northern California and Washington, and what little remains is incessantly under threat. The never quenched hunger of the timber industry has butchered its own lands, replacing them (when they do) with inferior and less profitable monocultural tree farms.

Incredibly, the timber companies demand as their divine right the public forests, and as they log off more and more public timber they demand more of what is left. The city of Astoria is a microcosm of the situation. Trees vs. money. The likely long-

range loss of a local ecosystem in exchange for short-term profit. Astoria is unusual in that it has a large city forest which most cities lack and many wish to have. This small remnant of a much larger forest on the hills above the Columbia River is instrumental to the quality of life many wish for themselves and their successors. Others do not share sympathy with that vision. Trees are economical units to them, to be harvested to meet market demands without consideration for esthetic or ecological value.

The Pacific Northwest is in the same shape as Astoria. Its resources have been ravaged and the greed for what remains will not end until all of it is gone - trees, fish, and everything else despoiled for single generation profit, one generation succeeding another in its desire to exploit whatever is available for sale.

Yet the glory days of logging are at an end, which leaves a simple dramatic choice - to either allow loggers to keep their jobs until they have cut down the remaining old growth forests, or save what is left at the cost of jobs they will lose anyway when the last trees are down. Automation and export of raw trees have accounted for the loss of most timber jobs, contrary to claims by the timber industry.

Timber companies and environmentalists push at each other with little inclination to compromise their positions. Stubborn environmentalists make good ancestors. Loggers do not. They have denuded the forests and showed little inclination to replace what was lost on their own lands, instead demanding a mandate of public forests for their chainsaws. And here is a paradox, not among managers who see trees as only ciphers on ledgers but in the attitude of proud roughneck loggers who consider themselves woodsmen and profess love for the forests they destroy and refuse to quit cutting until nothing is left.

When the last of the big trees are gone and the poor grade second and third growth timber reduce profits the managers will diversify their portfolios and dismiss the woodsmen who created their wealth: Let them be dishwashers.

Without the forests of Asia and the Americas we bequeath our descendants an arid world, a hot greenhouse. No shade to shield us from the sun's ultraviolet rays (we've virtually ruined upper atmosphere ozone). Water systems dry up without the cooler moist climates of forests. Biological diversity disappears. Marine life vanishes. Maybe only hallucinogenic drugs will recall the ancient symbiosis with Earth before our species moved out alone to dominate our home planet through obliteration of all that makes it home.

~MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER