

SLOW WOOD

REIMAGINING THE VALUE AND VALUES OF TIMBER

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

D

on Andre hacks at an overgrown trail with a machete on a 17-acre community-owned forest, within earshot of Highway 20 a couple miles east of Newport. The machete, which his father found at a yard sale years ago, curves forward at the tip, which helps power the overhead volleys he directs at the branches.

Andre spent much of his youth exploring forests like this one outside his family's home in Agate Beach north of Newport. The giant old trees of the coastal rainforest provided an endless playground where he was free to tramp around until his mom called him back home by laying on the horn of the family's Chevy truck.

After leaving the sleepy Oregon Coast to travel and pursue higher education, in the mid-'70s Andre came home to a shock: The forest of his youth, where his imagination and young legs once ran wild, was no more. The clearcut land so dismayed and infuriated Andre that, to this day, he'd rather not visit.

While Andre still feels the pain of losing his childhood stomping grounds, he says he tries to focus on positive change rather than his grievances with the timber industry.

The organization he helped found, the Oregon Coast Community Forest Association (OCCFA), is part of a growing movement to reimagine the relationship between timber communities and the forests that surround their homes. Across the state, Oregonians are working to develop forest management techniques and economic models that preserve forests for multiple uses.

This movement is much akin to the organic and slow food movement. Forest owners and timber communities are envisioning a timber economy that balances a healthy landscape with quality products and fair compensation for workers. And they're counting on people caring about where their wood comes from.

Alternative forestry models go by many names: regenerative forestry, sustainable forestry, resilient forestry and carbon-smart forestry. While there isn't one definition of these practices, they offer clear contrasts to the industrial timber model: Forests are managed for species and age diversity and not planted as single species tree crops, overall forest cover is maintained, logging near waterways is off-limits, harvest levels are lower than growth rates, and herbicide use is targeted rather than used on an entire plot.

Because the scale and intensity of these practices lacks the efficiency of corporate forestry, it cannot compete on the open market. The future success of this model depends on the public recognizing other kinds of forest values and demanding a forestry approach that values trees for more than their timber.

As advocates of alternative forestry push away from traditional forestry, they're using a variety of tools to realize this vision.

Woodlot owners are connecting with customers who want locally and sustainably produced wood. Communities are working with conservation-minded foresters to produce timber while protecting watersheds and wildlife.

Conservation groups and public utilities are working with landowners to preserve and improve habitat and watersheds through easements and land acquisitions. Economists are looking at market and legislative solutions to improve rural economies as they move away from the corporate forestry model.

Though the methods vary, the concerns are the same: maintaining healthy rural economies and healthy forest ecosystems.