

Land Management Ignorance and What to do about It

James L. Byford, *The University of Tennessee at Martin, School of Agriculture and Human Environment, 132 Brehm Hall, Martin, TN 38238*

Abstract: U.S. agriculture has become so efficient in modern times that <1.6% Americans gather our food and fiber. As society moves farther from the land, it understands less and less about land management. This has resulted in a protectionist attitude, instead of a “use—but use wisely” philosophy. Agriculturists, foresters, and fish and wildlife managers are all affected by society’s land management ignorance. Instead of fighting with each other, or with extreme anti- groups, we should combine resources to attack the real target enemy—land management ignorance. I believe the most effective audience to address are 4th–6th grade school children. The most effective weapons are volunteer-led programs, such as Ag-in-the-Classroom, Project Wild, Project Learning Tree, etc.; children-oriented programs on prime-time television; paid advertisements using children’s cartoons and role models; top quality music videos; and high quality demonstrations and exhibits. These should be provided free for teachers and youth program volunteers to use. We should re-direct some of our current Information and Education (I and E) section funding, but seek most of the cost from industry and private foundations. It will be expensive if done right, but effective—and the money is available.

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As we all know, land managers have been under fire for at least 2 decades now. Anti-hunters are trying to take away hunting, one of the most important tools of wildlife management. Land disturbance to disrupt plant succession to improve wildlife habitat is even opposed by some. Foresters are accosted for harvesting trees. Certain proven silvicultural methods are opposed—even the salvage of disease and insect-ravaged trees. Agriculturists are under the gun in many arenas. Animal rights activists oppose many livestock production practices and pesticides—even target-specific ones with short effective lives are questioned. These are just a few examples. Many others could be named. And while each group, wildlife biologists, foresters, and agriculturists feel their fight is unique, all have the same thing in common. We all want to manage the land to produce products beneficial to humans. And while humans are the focus, we

all know the land must be treated well or production will not be sustainable. This is not understood by the public. In fact, the public today doesn't understand land management much at all. Let's look at why, and what can be done to fix the problem we all share.

Humans have lived on earth for a million years. We invented agriculture 10,000 years ago. So, for 99% of the time humans have lived on earth, they've been hunters and gatherers. Today in the U.S., only 1.6% of us gather food.

The fact that only 1.6% of us gather food has created a lot of advantages for society. This has allowed 98.4% of us to spend our time developing and learning technology—to help us live longer and more comfortably. Because fewer people farm in the United States than in any other country, we have a stronger military—stronger because our soldiers had more time to go to school and become better trained. They also have better technology.

But the transition from a hunter/gatherer society to a consumer society has created some unique problems. As more people left the farm and society's lifestyle urbanized, we began to lose more and more land to development—roads, shopping malls, subdivisions and other infrastructure. Today we lose nearly 0.3 million ha/year in the U.S. In addition, better technology has helped us live longer, so the world population is now doubling every 40 to 50 years. Almost imperceptibly at first, we found ourselves with fewer people growing food on less land to feed more people. Fortunately, agricultural technology has so far been able to keep up with this dilemma. Nearly 20% of the U.S. labor force are agriculturists—developing, marketing, and teaching modern technology as well as processing, marketing, and distributing our food and fiber. Areas such as biotechnology, genetic engineering, international agribusiness, and food law will change from today's buzzwords to common household terms in the 21st century.

Agriculture so far has kept up. We've had hunger in certain parts of the world, but distribution is the biggest problem: our total world food supply is adequate. In fact, we've been maintaining about a 50-day surplus in recent years. But visionaries are now concerned that world food shortages could be in our future if current trends continue. The challenge will be even greater to feed more people, living more concentrated together with less land and fewer farmers. At the same time, we'll need to keep our food safe and our environment healthy.

Perhaps the greatest problem with the shift from a hunter/gatherer to a consumer society has been the resulting ecological and land management ignorance. You simply can't understand the land unless you work with it. The mainstream of today's society is at least 2 generations removed from the land. They may have concern about it, but they don't understand it, and they don't know what's involved in the production of the food and fiber they consume.

As fewer people farmed and more people left the land, apathy about the land grew. After all, social problems seemed more important. Then, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson stirred a well-fed public which had never thought about and certainly didn't understand the land's processes. Panic and paranoia

followed. Earth Day, 20 April 1970 was designed to make our children aware of the earth's perceived destruction. These children are now in their mid-30s and early 40s.

People who understood the land recognized we had some problems, but they weren't as hysterical as some who didn't manage the land. For this, they were labeled as "earth enemies." A "hands-off" attitude developed among society—one that favored protection and preservation, rather than a "use, but use wisely" perspective. At first, land managers laughed it off—another fad that would soon pass. But it didn't. When land managers realized this attitude was here to stay, the reaction was defensive and sometimes sharp—the same techniques as their critics. War was underway!

Let's face it. We're living in a communications age. If the President gets a \$200 hair cut, the world knows it within an hour. (Within days of that story, I saw a sign in Milan that read "President Clinton haircut here—half price.") While it's good that we are "in the know," as with all things there is a down side. A radical extremist with a personal agenda can get more air time than a Nobel prize-winning scientist. Why? Because news is competitive. Each network has to earn its advertising business by attracting viewers—and viewers are attracted to sensationalism. People react more to crises than to the status quo. The fact that everything we eat meets FDA safety guidelines is ho-hum, but the news that Alar, that may be on apples may cause cancer in rats subjected to very high levels, attracts attention—especially if reported by a movie star.

In a polarized standoff, there are usually 2 extremes, and the news media tend to focus on them. There are just a few people at each extreme, and the majority are somewhere in between. When the few people at the extremes are given air time, everybody gets the impression that 2 majority factions are fighting. This leads to pigeonholing everyone into one of the 2 extremes. The spark is fueled and eventually a full-scale battle is underway—and the news media thrive on it. We get the distorted impression that "they" are out to get "us" at any cost—that "they" are only concerned about "their" own agenda at "our" expenses—that "they" are greedy, callous, and don't fight fair, and that "we" have to draw our battle lines to protect "our" interests.

Lately, we who manage the land (wildlife biologists, foresters, and agriculturists) have lost sight of who the enemy really is, and we've begun to fight each other. Let's look at one such issue—the issue of private property rights vs. endangered species—something society has said we need. The Endangered Species Act was passed to prohibit wanton destruction of species due to irresponsible development and lack of land management planning. It was never intended to shut down land management and use.

However, unwavering enforcement of the law and liberal interpretation by the courts has often curtailed legitimate uses of the land—cutting into profits, and in some cases, forcing landowners out of business. Some well-known examples include curtailing forestry activities to protect the spotted owl—and closer to home, the red-cockaded woodpecker. This has created conflict between

forestry and wildlife management. Now questions are arising about more obscure species, such as mussels, wildflowers, etc. One lesser known example is the rancher who couldn't protect his sheep from a marauding grizzly bear, an endangered species. The clincher is that the government took no responsibility for the rancher's loss. The answer is not simple, but to solve this problem we don't have to abandon the Endangered Species Act and we don't have to put landowners and managers out of business. We may have to pay him/her for society's privilege of protecting those species—and if we don't want to pay, then they may not be that important to us after all.

There's no question. There have been abuses on both sides. Some landowners have abused the land, and some components of society recommend abusing landowner rights. But, the solution is not to pass more laws to protect landowners—or more laws to protect society's interests. We don't need more laws to control abuses by the 2 extremes. The solution is to ignore the extremes. Society is becoming numb to their antics and beginning to ignore them. The rest of us need to get together locally to come to a common understanding and begin to develop a strategy to work out our problems. We have to remember that most of us don't represent the extremes.

As we work together, let's remember 2 things. First, privatization of land is better than society ownership. If you doubt this consider the recent fall of communism in Eastern Europe. Consider that China increased its food production by 40% in 5 years, simply by reverting from communal farms to private ownership. The second thing to remember is, there are 2 ways to get what you want from a mule. You can entice him to do what you want by feeding him carrots, or you can beat him with a stick. Carrots work better.

Let's look at what everybody can agree on. We all depend on the land—to provide our food, fiber (including wood), minerals, water, energy and living space. It also provides us with things that make life enjoyable, even though we may not have to have them—such as wildlife, aesthetics, and recreation. We need these resources now, and our children will need them later. We all know that our ever-increasing human population is putting more and more burden on less and less land to provide our needs. We all recognize that as people get further away from the land, they know less about it. They will increasingly question the way we manage the land, whether for agriculture, forestry, mining or wildlife. Over 80% of the U.S. population is urban now, and this problem of understanding is likely to deteriorate further. The biggest problem is a lack of understanding by the masses.

The enemy is ignorance about the land, its management, and its stewardship. The enemy is not each other. We can only whip the enemy if we know who it is and if we all join forces—all of us who believe in sustained production from the land through good stewardship and sound management. Instead of fighting ignorance, we are fighting each other (wildlife, forestry, and agriculture types). We need to combine resources and energy to fight ignorance.

Within each of our groups, we complain to each other about land igno-

rance, especially when it results in actions which curtail our management. Let's look at wildlife types for example. Up to this point, our approaches to solve land management ignorance are archaic and insufficient—like using a BB gun to stop a charging rhino. We talk to each other instead of mainstream society—through Game and Fish magazines to sportsmen, or news articles for outdoor columns, read by sportsmen. We're preaching to the choir. When we do talk to mainstream society, we use public service announcements which pile up on editor's desks. Or we contribute to the Wildlife Legislative Fund to fight anti's. We may have to spend some money this way for the short run, or lose our management tools. But for the most part, these efforts are too little too late. We're fighting symptoms instead of the cause.

Anti's aren't devils. They're good meaning people, like you and me, but ones who don't understand. Ones who weren't reached just a few years ago when they were children. It's too late for them. It's more efficient and effective to focus on the children. And wildlife, forestry, and agriculture types need to join forces and combine resources to get the job done.

In the last several years, I have been involved with a number of programs, locally and nationally, whose missions are to make our school children aware of the land—its importance and its management. Some of these programs you've heard of: Ag-in-the-Classroom, Project Wild, Project Learning Tree, and Aquatic Wild, to name a few. These programs have far more in common than they have differences. I've been struck with the realization that volunteers who teach all these programs are saying basically the same thing!—that the land and its resources are critical to us—and that management, whether agriculture, forestry, or wildlife management, is okay, because people are species which need the earth, too. We can use our resources and ensure that our children can use them too—if we use them wisely. These programs are all teaching our children basically the same thing, yet they are often sponsored by different agencies who disagree and bicker with each other!

These programs are good, but we need to join forces and carry them out together. And we together need to do more, much more. I believe we can get the most bang for the dollar if we focus on 4th, 5th, and 6th grade school children as the prime target to kill the enemy—land management ignorance. I also believe the best weapons are children-oriented programs on video and prime time television. For example, we need to be developing cartoons with land management themes, paid ads using children's role models, and top quality music videos provided free to schools and youth program volunteers. We need high quality demonstrations and exhibits for teachers and youth program volunteers to use.

We know this works—it won't have to be an experiment. If you question whether it works, just ask children about the importance of litter control or the value of seatbelts. They know! And so do their parents, their grandparents, their peers, their teachers, and pretty soon their children!

Too expensive you say. I say it's too expensive not to! We have to break out of the paradigm of sportsmen or taxpayers paying for all our education. We

can redirect some of that money to this effort, and it will be better spent. But corporations, foundations and private individuals will pay for a large chunk of it, if we combine our wildlife, forestry, and agriculture resources and give them a good package to sponsor.

For example, paper companies are making a lot of money now. They have a lot of land, and timber prices have skyrocketed. Predictions are that timber prices will remain high well into the 21st century. And they'll have to give some money to non-profit causes or lose it to taxes. The opportunity is here—now. Just remember, the enemy is not each other; it's land management ignorance. The most economical, efficient target is 4th to 6th grade school children, and the best weapon is the moving media. It'll be expensive if done right, but the money is there.

I'd like to leave you with this thought. We have the best country in the world, and if you don't believe that, just do a little international traveling. It's no accident that communism failed throughout the world, and now the world is trying to emulate us. We have the most freedom and the safest, cleanest, and most abundant food, water, and air. We need to make our children aware of this and proud to be Americans. Our children will soon be in charge, and they'll need to take over the responsibility with a balanced perspective. Of all the things we ever do, this will probably be the most important.