
The Forest for The Trees

"Poplar Front: The Rebirth of America's Forests" by Jonathan H. Adler, in *Policy Review* (Spring 1993), the Heritage Foundation, 214 Mass. Ave. N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002-4999.

At the turn of the century, Gifford Pinchot and other leaders of the emerging conservation movement warned that the United States would soon destroy the last of its once-vast forests. Their pessimistic forecasts were not without foundation, notes Adler, an environmental-policy analyst at the Washington-based Competitive Enterprise Institute. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw the deforestation of vast tracts of land. By 1920, only 600 million acres of forest remained of what had been one billion acres.

In the decades since then, however, Adler observes, "American forests have been reborn." The area of forestland in the lower 48 states remains roughly what it was in 1920, but there are more trees now: an estimated 230 billion.

Reforestation has been especially notable east of the Mississippi, where nature has reclaimed vast tracts of abandoned farmland. During the last 40 years, timberland in the eastern United States has expanded by 3.8 million acres; in addition, nearly

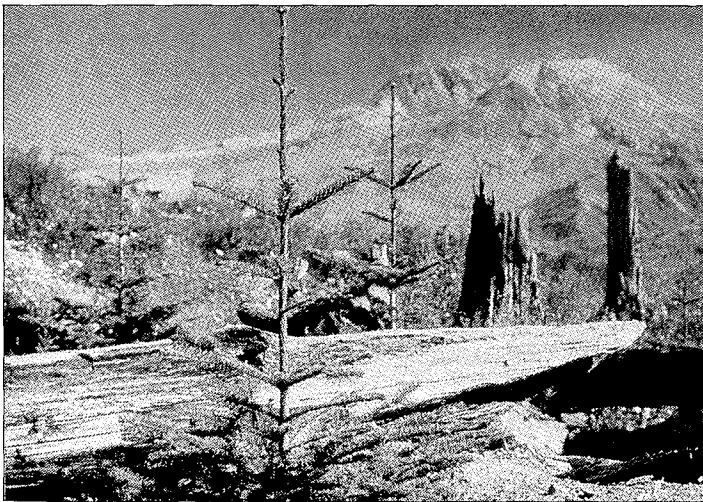
three million acres have been declared wilderness and protected by the federal government. By 1980, New England's forests covered more land than they had in the mid-19th century, thanks mostly to the decline of farming. Although forest regeneration in the West has not been as dramatic, there has been net forest growth there, too.

What accounts for the recovery of America's forests? A major factor, Adler says, has been the development of better forest-management techniques, particularly fire control. "At the turn of the century, forest fires consumed as many as 50 million acres annually . . . and were responsible for hundreds of deaths. . . . Today, wildfire rarely consumes one-tenth of its turn-of-the-century highs." Protection against fires, moreover, encourages private landowners to plant more trees.

Technological change has also helped the forests. The rise of the automobile, for example, meant that rural communities no longer had to depend on rail transportation, with its enormous need for wood. The decline of draft animals eased the pressure to convert forest into pastureland. Advances in farm productivity left more room for oak, hickory, and pine. The shift to oil and gas for cooking and heating meant a big reduction in the demand for wood. Even such seemingly small things as the development and use of wood preservatives following World War II have helped.

The market economy has been another major factor in the forests' recovery, according to Adler. As timber resources became scarcer, prices rose, giving private landowners the incentive to increase the timber supply by replanting. Over 80 percent of the nation's annual forest planting—covering approximately three million acres—now occurs on private land.

Deforestation remains the rule in much of the developing world. "[The] best hope for the world's forests," Adler believes, "lies not in bureaucratic control and multilateral agreements, but rather in the replication of what has worked in the United States."



A six-year-old Noble Fir grows in forest land that was replanted after it was devastated by the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens, Washington.