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Saving Forests One Tree at a Time

An Interview with Laurie Wayburn

Editor's note: Laurie Wayburn recently won two major awards for her leadership in forest conservation: one from the James Irvine Foundation and the other from the Land Trust Alliance. She has been conserving forests in California since she and Constance Best founded the Pacific Forest Trust in 1993, long before anyone talked about the pivotal role of forests in stabilizing our global climate. Mary Ambrose interviewed her on NAM's radio program New America Now. This is a transcription of that interview.

NAM: What percentage of forestlands are owned privately?

In the U.S. almost two-thirds of our forests are privately owned.

If we want our forests to provide us with water (75-85 percent of our water comes out of forests), to be habitats for fish and wildlife, as places of recreation, we need to focus on private forest lands just as much as public forest lands.

Because private forest landowners earn their livings from their forest, we need to work with the market, providing economic return [is] a key tool in preserving those forests.

NAM: Describe the model you created.

What the public wants from forests is clean water, clean air, beautiful spaces, places to walk and take their children and grandchildren. But what we pay forestland owners for is turning their land into shopping malls and cutting their forests as fast as they can so we pay them for what they have cut as quickly as possible.

What we've been paying them for and what we really value have been completely at odds. Our focus in founding the Pacific Forest Trust was to find ways to build financial markets for conserving and restoring forests. A conservation easement is a legal tool that allows a landowner to dedicate their land as forestland, giving up the rights to developing it and also limiting how it is managed.

A conservation easement is like buying a deed of property, but]when you buy property normally you buy positive rights on it; to build a house, cut the timber, graze cattle. When you buy a conservation easement, you buy the right to prohibit subdivision, prohibit or limit development.

NAM: So you tell the private forestland owner, give us, say 20 percent of your land, under this cessation of development, then you can do whatever you want with the 80 percent?

Very much like that. Prior to our work, there were two models of conservation easements: Prohibit everything and call it a 'forever wild space', or prohibit development but allow any other kind of usage. In forests, 'allowing any other kind of usage' could actually, be very damaging, so we created a new form of easement to guide forest management to focus on sustainability, allowing the harvest of timber, but limiting it.

The second tool was finding ways to pay landowners for other services the forest provided that they don't get paid for; amongst those the biggest was their role in stabilizing climate. Forests absorb carbon dioxide as they grow. Yet, we don't pay landowners for that service, in fact what we pay them for is stopping that service, for cutting those forests down and turning them into development.

The second largest cause of excess CO₂ in the atmosphere today that is the loss and the depletion or degradation of forests.

This was a huge opportunity. If we could create a market to pay landowners to restore forests and to keep them as forests we would be creating a huge service in combating climate change because we could reabsorb CO₂ and prevent its release. And we could make it absolutely financially competitive for landowners to keep their forests as opposed to selling them for development or cutting them as fast as possible.

NAM: What about old forests?

We have very few old forests in the United States and very few indeed in private hands. There's probably .0005 percent in private hands.

Our forests are younger than they would be naturally. When Europeans came to California, the average age of redwood forests was over two hundred years. Ten to 15 percent were one hundred to two hundred. Today it's the exact opposite. Eighty percent of them are under 100 years of age and we are lucky if 10 percent are over a hundred and only in National and State parks is there anything over 200 hundred years old. Those forests, on average, held 20 times the amount of carbon that we have today.

NAM: How do you maintain an old forest and harvest it?

We don't have those old forests, so we have a lot of work to get from A to B. Again, the simple analogy would be in banking. So, our forests might be on average in the 30 year-old range and what we want to do is move them back up to the 80-year-old range and the 100-year-old range.

So, instead of every 30 years cutting them down to zero, we stagger how we harvest them, so that you continue to harvest out of your landscape of 30-year-old trees, you harvest some of them at 31, some at 32, some at 33. And on average over time you'll start to have 40, 50 and 60 year old forests.

As a landowner you know that your forest at 60 will have at least double the amount of timber that it had at 30. How do you weigh that time? That's where the power of [the] market comes in, because you are rebuilding the amount of carbon stored in those forests as well as building the amount of timber inventory as you harvest them gradually over time.

You have more carbon taken out of the atmosphere than would otherwise happen and you can be paid for that. With AB32 landowners can be paid for the time to re-grow and restore their forests.

AB32 is an absolutely landmark law. California is the first in the nation to limit the amount of greenhouse gasses that we emit, as a state, into the atmosphere. We put a cap on the amount of greenhouse gas that can be emitted and we identified a timetable by which that cap would be put into place.

Under this legislation they identified that there was a planning process leading up to when regulations would really hit in the year 2012. 2008 to 2012 is an early action and planning period. I'm very pleased that the state has acknowledged the role of forests in leading the cap and the role of forests. We have had significant success in the state recognizing the role of forests and embracing it as a very powerful tool.

Frankly, California is the first globally to have a standardized, state-backed system, whereby forest landowners can play a constructive role and forests are intimately integrated in how we meet this climate challenge.

In founding the Pacific Forest Trust a key goal was for us to recognize that forests are so important to peoples livelihoods, the people who live in those forests, the people who work in those forests, the people who derive income from those forests as well as the people who get their water and their recreation and their wildlife experiences there, and meshing those things together, to transform conservation from being a passive and legacy experience to be an active experience about how you live and work with the land.