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Big News for Small Forests

By Ian Hanna, Yes! Magazine

Sustainable, small-scale working forests are feeling the economic pinch. But nonprofit groups are helping family- and community-owned woodlands thrive by connecting them with carbon markets.

John Henrikson, a database programmer turned forester, lives a good life at Wild Thyme Farm. He's one of a new breed of back-to-the-lander that's looking to find small-scale solutions to today's big problems. His 150 acres near Oakville, Washington, in the heart of timber country, are a direct reflection of both his passion for forest stewardship and half a lifetime spent learning about the forest.

"The land tells you what to do, and this property has taken over my life," says Henrikson. "We need more people to develop that relationship—to fall in love with the land."

Henrikson's approach embodies a new way of thinking about our relationship with forests. For years he has been processing his own trees into trim and molding, sold through a broad network of local businesses. Five years ago he got his forest certified to Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standards, a global system for eco-labeling sustainably managed forests and the products derived from them. He's also made his farm into a destination for workshops, celebrations, and the conservation-curious. And, most recently, he's developed a project to sell rights to the carbon sequestered on his property.

Small is Big

After oceans, forests are the largest sink for atmospheric carbon and the one we have the most ability to manipulate, be it for good or bad. As trees grow, they remove carbon from the atmosphere

and store it in their woody tissues. If managed properly, trees, soil, and some wood products can keep that carbon locked up and out of the atmosphere for hundreds or thousands of years.

Forestry-based carbon offsets—which allow polluters to offset their emissions by funding forests that sequester carbon—are a highly complex and contentious issue. Many worry these relatively inexpensive offsets will be mere greenwashing, providing a veil behind which polluters can hide, or that they will result in large corporations profiting at the expense of local residents, especially community and indigenous groups.

In the United States, though, small-scale forestry, like the kind Henrikson practices, offers an opportunity for families and communities to profit from conserving forests. Family-owned woodlands make up roughly two-thirds of the country's working forestlands. Collectively, the American people control far more working forest than industry and public agencies combined. If we are to save forests and minimize climate change, small woodlands are key.

New carbon markets, developed by nonprofits in all parts of the country, are focusing more and more on small woodlands. These regional and state programs are well-suited to support local decision-making, provide personal accountability,

and cater to regionally specific concerns, like salmon in the Pacific Northwest or the lack of old-growth forests in the East. They also make sure that the money earned for carbon sequestration goes to local families and communities.

For Small Woodlands, A New Lease on Life

Henrikson's success is not a typical tale in the Pacific Northwest. Even here, in the heart of timber country, the total acreage of forested land is declining, as industrial forests are cleared to make way for houses and shopping centers. Over the past 30 years, Washington State alone has lost more than two million acres of forest, mostly for suburban development. Most of the industrial forests that remain are now treated primarily as fiber farms with quick harvest cycles, providing little in the way of diversity or habitat.

Throughout the country, family woodlands are threatened not only by development but also by competition from industrial forestry. Carbon markets that reward conservation and healthy, well-managed forests may give sustainably managed forests the edge they need.

John Henrikson is turning his forest's carbon storage capacity into income with the help of NW Neutral, a program of the Northwest Natural Resource Group, a conservation and rural development advocacy group in the Pacific Northwest. Based on a complete forest inventory, a long-term management plan, and a certification process that includes both a carbon protocol and FSC standards, NW Neutral pays woodland owners to maintain existing carbon stocks in older forests. In return, landowners must commit to a 100-year deed-restricting contract and agree to ongoing verification and monitoring. Every few years a NW Neutral auditor will visit the property to ensure that tree growth and carbon stocks exceed agreed-upon levels.

Another program is Carbon Canopy, a collaboration among the nonprofit Dogwood Alliance and several partners (including large companies like Staples), which is helping make carbon accounting possible for woodland owners in the Southeast. Now in the pilot stage, the program offers payment to landowners who, by using improved forest management practices, increase carbon stocks on their land.

In Pennsylvania, The Nature Conservancy's Working Woodlands Program is doing similar work, with the intention of exporting the program to other states. [And in California, the first state to enact carbon emissions limits, the Pacific Forest Trust has led the development of meaningful regulations for projects listed on the state's Climate Action Registry.](#)

Many of the new markets that make Henrikson's success in selling his carbon rights possible are driven by a growing recognition that conservation must have economic value to be successful on a grand scale. Ultimately all life depends on the health of natural systems, but in capitalist economies we've tended to ignore the true costs of environmental and social damage. We're just beginning to understand how to calculate the true costs of the services that forests provide, such as clean water, soil fertility, endangered species habitat, or a stable climate.

This process of complete accounting, called "ecosystem services" valuation, will hopefully put our natural resource decisions into a more complete context and change the way we do business.

Unfortunately, with the global market for carbon offsets exploding, there's huge variability in the quality of carbon programs, from excellent to mediocre to downright shameful greenwashing. Since the U.S. carbon market is still mostly unregulated, it is strictly "buyer beware," and getting quality information is essential for anyone buying offsets. Luckily, organizations like the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences offer resources to help gauge the success of projects.

There is broad agreement among climate scientists that the decisions we make over the next decade will determine the severity of climate change and quality of life for our descendants over the next century. When it comes to forests, we know what kind of changes we need, and we have excellent working models like Henrikson's throughout the country. Ultimately, the power to transform the world's forests for the better lies in the hands of the people, what they value, and where they choose to invest.