Profile of a Forest Practitioner

By Peter P Bundy

Here in the Lake States, most of our forests are beat up. They are beat up from past agricultural practices, like farming and grazing. They are beat up from past forestry practices, like high-grading and "commercial" clear cuts. They are beat up from recent wind storms and ancient fires. They are also beat up from diseases, bugs and drought. Due to all of these travails, our forests may appear like a lost cause.

But, in fact, the contrary holds true. The past abuses afford those of us who work in the woods an opportunity of wonderful proportions. In Lake States forests, almost every landscape that we visit holds a silver lining: a chance to change the trajectory of the curve. We might call it, as ecologist Bill Drury does, "enlightened intervention". I prefer the term restoration forestry.

Restoration forestry, as I see it, encompasses many different actions and strategies. Some of them are ecological and silvicultural. Some of them are economic. And many others are social in nature. It is the combination of these strategies that offers the greatest rewards and returns, both to the landowners, and to the land.

The ecological and silvicultural aspects of restoration forestry for my clients (and on my own lands) focus on returning health and productivity to the land. Since ecology is the study of the interaction of the parts of the forest, it helps to begin this process with an ecological classification system, such as the ones developed by John Kotar for Wisconsin and John Almendinger (et al) for Minnesota. Such systems, while imperfect at interpreting all local conditions, help us to gain an understanding of the potential of many of the working parts. With this knowledge, we make fewer mistakes trying to grow hard pines on mesic sites. Ecological considerations also help us to determine which way the forest wants to go. Lines of succession are more clearly understood. If there is a nice red oak stand on an end moraine, with strong sugar maple regeneration in the shrub layer, I may do well NOT to maintain the site to red oak for the next generation. Ecologically, the site wants to move forward, and if I wish to nudge it backward I'm in for a lot of work and a significant financial investment. (to say nothing of the strong possibility of failure)

Which brings me to the economic side of restoration forestry. Almost all of my clients, particularly those in the private sector, care about the financial return on their lands. While they are sensitive to the abstract goals of "returning forest health", (who doesn't want a healthy forest?) this is a much easier pitch if I also talk about potential long term financial returns. In the Lake States, this often means intermediate treatments: harvests which remove a portion of the working capital and leave the longer lived and better formed species to grow into greater value. For some family forest landowners (the do it yourself types) these harvests may focus on fuelwood for their stoves in the winter or a

lumber pile for their next building project. My job is to demonstrate, with the ubiquitous paint gun, how to think about the trees to cut for a warm stove or a wood shed. Silvicultural considerations are much better understood by landowners when we stand under a suppressed tree on a walk, than when I talk about at their dinner table.

As an example of this process, I have helped two local forestry cooperatives in central Minnesota with their management. About eight years ago, both cooperatives agreed to have many of their members certify their lands to FSC standards. Their members were interested in "a better way" and I was already certified under the FSC program. At first, the members were enthusiastic about the new program. We initiated inventory projects to give them a clearer idea of their resource base. We talked about coarse woody debris, wetland habitat restoration and invasive species. As time passed, however, many members grew restless. Markets were slow to develop for their "certified" woodland products and they wanted to see a return on their investment.

After years of patience and some frustration, each of the cooperatives has chosen a different path to economic viability. One of them has started up a dry kiln. and markets their wood products locally. Although they maintain high standards in the woods, they have dropped their FSC certificate. Who could blame them? They bought into the program for more than the ecological benefits, and the economic benefits never appeared.

The other forestry cooperative still has members who have maintained their certification through FSC. They felt that it was important to be a part of an international movement for better forest practices. At the same time, they started up a sawmill enterprise to purchase a portable sawmill for members. Their approach to economic vitality was to bring the sawmill to the woods and to their members, and now their sawmill partnership is in the black and supports other cooperative activities.

It is clear to me, from these examples, that the ecological aspects of restoration forestry require an economic leg to support them. In the same way , a social strategy is also necessary for success. This may be as simple as earning the trust of the landowner and his or her family. More often, the involvement of a larger community enters into the picture. One neighbor may have a better access road to the work site. Another neighbor may be concerned about the property lines or their hunting habitat. Or, perhaps the land abuts up to public land and off road vehicles are a concern.

One of my clients is a non-profit organization. When I began to help them seven years ago, their social philosophy was "leave the woods alone". As a result of many years of observing beat up woodlands, they had come to view the best management of the forest as "no management". This is a relatively common social attitude today and it drives decision making for many private landowners. Over time, I was able to introduce active management with positive results. We started with blister rust control in white pine and then moved on to hardwood regeneration and wetland restoration. Three years ago we conducted our first commercial harvest, a thinning in 40 year red pine. The harvest was a success. The woods looked better after the thinning and there was room for more species diversity as well as a paycheck. But this simple thinning operation was many years in the

social making. It was imperative that I first focus on the social attitudes and human environment before addressing any silvicultural practices in the woods.

Restoration forestry is, in a nutshell, a balancing act. Sometimes the emphasis falls heavily on economic investments and rates of return. At other times, silvics and ecology drive the decision making process. And finally, there are the social considerations which begin with family members and stretch out to neighbors, communities and government agencies.

All of these elements create a fascinating and complex stew. Sometimes the challenges are daunting. But the opportunities for creative solutions abound. That is what keeps me motivated as I try to put restoration forestry into practice in my own back yard.