

NESAF speech 3-09

Good afternoon! We gather this afternoon at an in-between time. It's the season that the poet laureate of our region, Robert Frost captured so well:

The sun was warm but the wind was chill.
You know how it is with an April day
When the sun is out and the wind is still,
You're one month on in the middle of May.
But if you so much as dare to speak,
A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,
A wind comes off a frozen peak,
And you're two months back in the middle of March.

It's an in-between season. And at an awards banquet like this, we find our place in the generational chain, in between those who came before, whose names we find on the awards themselves, pioneers like Austin Cary and Molly Beattie, and those who are now taking up the torch, like Maggie Machinist, this year's winner of the Young Forester Leadership award.

I am conscious as I stand here that, just a few weeks ago, we lost Dave Smith, the only person to have won the New England chapter's Distinguished Service Award twice. Dave wrote the definitive text book on silviculture. More personally, Dave was the man who introduced me to the beautiful complexity of Baskahegan's forests. He had immersed himself in the woods, and though as a reticent Yankee he never would have used the verb, you could tell he loved them. As I stood with him in the forest and listened to him talk, it was as if I was learning how trees thought—the birch's urgency to follow the sun, or the long-enduring patience of the umbrella spruce, waiting for that opening in the canopy to allow it to continue its growth toward the sky.

Dave caught my attention early on, when he told me, in that deep bass voice of his that “forestry is a sort of applied ecology.” In those days I was an ardent environmentalist with no silvicultural knowledge. And I found myself drawn to this unique in-between profession of forestry, which makes its home on the edge between economics and ecology. This can be a tricky edge to walk.

In between seasons, in between generations, in between ecology and economics. As to the latter—these days you can't open the newspapers—or your 401K statement—without realizing that we are living in an in-between time. It's clear that the future-be-damned market mania that stoked investments and the overall economy over recent decades is over. No longer will we trust solely the “invisible hand” of the markets; we have been reminded again of the need for visible, human hands to steer these markets to produce, in the words of Gifford Pinchot, the founder of the US Forest Service, “the greatest good for the greatest number, in the long run.” An investment banker told me recently that what we are experiencing now is different from the cycles we have experienced before. “This

is not a downturn,” he said, “this is a discontinuity.” We are in a new world the outlines of which are not yet clear. We are in between.

We are a profession that learns from what came before. The applied ecology that Dave spoke about is based on knowledge developed through long observation of forest systems adapting to disturbances. But now we are living under the gathering shadow of climate change, and we cannot say with certainty that the spruce forests of Maine or the sugar maples of Vermont will be able to sustain themselves in the times to come. Much is up for grabs.

Our society is beginning to deconstruct the mistaken assumptions of financial markets, but we have yet to get to the bottom of the short-sighted thinking that governed so much of recent economic activity.

When I started managing Baskahegan 25 years or so ago, I visited every large landowner in Maine who would talk to me, and asked them about their expectations for financial returns from timberland. I spoke to nearly a dozen people and their answers fell in a narrow range--2 to 4% beyond inflation. Nothing eye-popping, but steady and dependable. 15 years later, we had the Baskahegan lands appraised. When I turned to the financial analysis in the appraisal, I read of investor expectations of a 6 to 9% return. Where does this number come from? I asked the appraiser, who was also a forester. “That’s what the markets demand,” he replied, as if that explained everything. I pushed back—but what’s it based on? He was adamant—it’s simply what the markets require. I drove home thinking, “But what about the biological rate of return?” Did it have no standing?

That, of course, was in 1998, at the beginning of the valuation upheaval we have experienced, when markets were perceived to only go up, never down. It was before investors monetized recreational and HBU values. and sold conservation easements to public interests. Now, with the possible exception of carbon, every forest value has its price. And, as we enter this new era, we have yet to learn whether forest investors will “demand” more than the biological rate of return when they buy lands subject to conservation easements. We are in between.

Let’s look ahead to the role of our profession, and to the leadership we can provide now and in the times to come. One word we hear a lot these days is sustainability—meeting the needs of our generation without diminishing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This is something we know a lot about—after all, foresters invented the concept. We are well positioned to talk conceptually about the proper relationship between growth and harvest, about age class imbalances and sustained yield. But to live up to the promise of our profession, we also need to be willing to speak honestly about the limits of natural systems, their biological rate of return. We can no longer capitulate to what the market demands simply because it demands it.

Our profession has walked the edge between economics and ecology forever. Embedded in this walk is the recognition that humans are part of natural systems—only in the mind

can we be separated from nature. But, too often we have granted pre-eminence to the economic desires of our employers and clients without speaking clearly about the difference between stewardship--providing the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run--and short term exploitation that favors the current generation over future ones. Aldo Leopold got to the root of this market view when he wrote, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us."

Most of us have been captured to some degree by this market thinking, as we have worked to meet the expectations of the public or industry or investors. Certain leaders, however, have stood up. A century ago, Austin Cary arrived as the last of Maine's original forests were being cut over, and insisted that the Brown Paper Company reduce its harvests to sustainable levels. That's why the "Practicing Professional" award is named for him.

Cary stood up for economic sustainability. Ecological sustainability is a concept we are still getting our heads around. We honor today a man who spent over a decade developing our understanding of what this means. John Hagan came to Maine in 1992 convinced that the large industrial clearcuts in the Maine woods spelled certain disaster for neotropical songbirds. But the data he collected showed that the fragmentation of smaller cuts--mandated ironically, by the recently passed Forest Practices Act--was a greater problem, since large, contiguous blocks of forest were necessary for healthy song bird populations. Even more important, John was not only willing to listen to all perspectives, he was also willing to speak truth to power--in this case the environmental groups--who were infuriated by the way his data undermined their cherished certainty.

They accused him of being a lap dog to industry. We in industry, of course, were comforted by this, and agreed to work with John to test if it were possible to continue to produce forest products from large landscapes without losing a single species. Again following the data, he found that our compression of age classes in the forest was putting at risk species of lichens and mosses that have coevolved with older trees. And suddenly industry was having truth spoken to us. And yet the whole time John was also listening and engaging all who cared about the forest in his passion for good data with which to make better management decisions.

John walked that in-between world of economics and ecology. He was embodying another principle articulated by Leopold, who wrote, "When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. John convinced a full range of stakeholders to challenge our imbedded assumption that the forestry we practice is compatible with the long-term health and diversity of our forests. He invited us to ask, openly, Is it really a win-win?

John sets an important example for us in these in-between times: He respects all stakeholders; he follows the data, not his preconceived notions, and he speaks honestly and forthrightly to all who will listen.

There is no place on the globe better suited than New England, with our over 300 years of cutting trees for commercial uses, to demonstrate to the 21st Century what sustainability—ecological and economic—looks like. Foresters have a critical role to play as our society searches for a way forward marked by sanity and sustainability. As we bump up against the limits of natural systems, the world increasingly is asking us to see the earth as a community to which we belong, and, following the best data available, practice applied ecology and, use the forest with love and respect.

In these in-between times, as we face new challenges in our climate and in our economy, as we slough off outworn perspectives, as we seek to interact with the forests in a way that both nature and humans will thrive, we would do well to follow the examples of Austin Cary, Dave Smith and John Hagan.

May we in this room care enough,
may we be courageous enough,
to stand firm in what we know about natural systems,
to speak it clearly, and
to offer it in service to both our human and natural communities.