

Tue, Nov 9, 2004

DAILY TRIBUNE and WAUSAU DAILY HERALD

United effort on forests is refreshing

Strict conservationists look at the millions of acres of Wisconsin woodland and see an Eden - a place where animals live, trees grow and man should be viewed as an invasive species.

At the other extreme end of the spectrum are those who see our forests as a resource to be exploited - grow 'em, cut 'em, replant 'em and move on.

Neither approach is realistic and neither recognizes that the vast majority of us see a happy medium between the extremes.

Yet the counterproductive language of debate between the two groups continues to prevent real discourse. Branding any conservationist a bunny-hugger or any forester a rapist of the land is pointless.

That's why we're so happy to see all of the groups that are interested in Wisconsin's forests coming together this week to work on finding a common vision for their future.

Today and Wednesday, stakeholders from groups as disparate as The Nature Conservancy and paper mills will gather in Madison as part of the Governor's Conference on Forestry. They are charged with developing a statewide forest plan that recognizes all the different demands placed upon our 16 million acres of woodlands.

The demands are many. During a recent three-year assessment, 52 different areas of concern were identified.

Fred Souba Jr. is chairman of the Wisconsin Council on Forestry, which is sponsoring the conference, and he's in charge of supplying wood for the Stora Enso North America paper mills in central Wisconsin.

Not surprisingly, he places high value upon the economic significance of our woodlands - with good reason.

More than 1,850 businesses in Wisconsin use wood products. It's a \$20 billion industry that provides more than 100,000 jobs. The state's paper mills predominantly use wood grown and harvested on private and public lands, big and small, in Wisconsin, Souba said.

Then there's the secondary economic impact of the woods. Forest-based recreation is a \$5.5 billion industry, beginning with the \$1 billion deer-hunting industry and working its way down to bird-watchers and snowshoers.

Those recreational pursuits merge into the second way in which Wisconsin forests touch our lives - their social impact.

Put simply, folks like living in an area in which trees, walking paths, wild berries, delectable mushrooms, abundant hunting opportunities and the chance to glimpse a wild wolf all are

For more information

To learn more about the Governor's Conference on Forestry or discover more ways you can enjoy Wisconsin's woodlands, visit wisconsinforestry.org.

outside our doors or within day-trip range.

Finally, there's the fundamental ecological impact of the forests to consider. They cover about 46 percent of all land in Wisconsin and provide habitat for birds and animals, create oxygen while eliminating carbon dioxide and they naturally filter our groundwater.

Threats to all these uses are everywhere.

Large tracts of land are being parceled up as they're sold or passed down through families. All those borders make it difficult to enact comprehensive plans.

Woodlots are being cleared, for housing or development or for harvest. That harms biodiversity.

Exotic species are invading, recreational users are competing for space and fewer than 25 percent of private landowners have plans for managing their properties.

What conference participants - and all Wisconsin residents - must focus upon is that we all share a goal of sustaining our state's forests.

Ensuring that they remain healthy and available to all the different groups that use them requires a long-term strategy.

The conference is expected to yield a plan that will be used by the Council on Forestry as it advises the governor, Legislature, Department of Natural Resources and other agencies.

We applaud all those who are working together to make this happen.

- DAILY TRIBUNE and WAUSAU DAILY HERALD