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Book review

The Tragedy of Clearcutting

by Richard Evanoff

Clearcut: The Tragedy of Industrial Forestry, edited by Bill Devall, large format, 294 pages. Available for US\$30 from Sierra Club Books/Earth Island Press.

Most coffee table books about nature are filled with beautiful pictures of forests and landscapes. The sheer size of *Clearcut: The Tragedy of Industrial Forestry* (30 x 35 cm.) qualifies it as a coffee table book and it has lots of photos of forests and landscapes to be sure—about 150 in all, most of them in color. But they are anything but beautiful. In these scenes we confront the total devastation of vast tracts of natural forests, the stumps of felled trees, the snake-like windings of logging roads, the debris of discarded limbs and branches, the bleeding wounds of red dirt, and the empty silence of a raped landscape. On the dust jacket David Brower, Chairman of the Earth Island Institute, notes that in most wilderness books the beauty of the writing and images may be so tranquilizing that we end up thinking, "Look how much there is! Surely it is inexhaustible!" The intention of *Clearcut* is not to lull us into a false sense of security, but to awaken us to the reality that the earth's forests are not unlimited and that something must be done to stop the destruction.

The book has been masterfully edited by Bill Devall and includes contributions from 33 photographers and 15 writers, rounded out with graphics, quotations, and poems (by Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, and Lone Wolf Circles, among others). The heart of the book consists of a series of color plates, which are divided into bioregions located in 25 American states and nine Canadian provinces. Each of the photographs is accompanied by a brief essay giving background information on the scene in question. For instance, a picture from the Ohio Valley Bioregion (in my home state) shows clearcutting in the Wayne National Forest (where I used to go on family vacations as a kid). At present only 9 percent of the forest's 203,000 acres is reserved for non-timber purposes, with the remainder slated for eventual clearcutting. After 170 pages of looking at similar photographs and notes that document the destruction of untold millions of acres of forests, we finally get to the bold-faced punchline: "Multiply the landscapes you have just seen by a factor of several thousand and you will approximate the destruction wrought by industrial forestry across North America."

Longer essays at the front and back of the book help to put the visual documentation into even greater perspective. Some well-known nature writers, scientists, and activists are among the contributors: Dave Foreman, presently director of the North American Wilderness Recovery Project; Colleen McCrory, chairperson of the Valhalla Wilderness Society; Reed Noss, editor of the influential journal *Conservation Biology*; and two of my own favorite ecophilosophers (in addition to Devall), Alan Drengson of the University of Victoria in Canada and Warwick Fox of the University of Tasmania in Australia. Two essays I found especially fascinating were those by Felice Pace and Herb Hammond—Pace was an invited participant in the Forest Summit conference convened

by U.S. President Bill Clinton in Portland, Oregon and Hammond is a Canadian forest ecologist and activist.

Pace's "Cultural Clearcuts: The Sociology of Timber Communities in the Pacific Northwest" points out that the real causes of chronically high unemployment among timber and sawmill workers are overcutting, automation, and corporate greed. Automation means that more trees can be cut with less labor, making long-term forestry operations unsustainable but increasing the profits of timber companies at least in the short term. Since the smaller privately owned logging companies have now been replaced by a handful of large and powerful transnational corporations, the game can go global: once extracted by local timber workers, logs are typically shipped for processing to other countries where labor costs are lower, depriving local communities of even more jobs. The timber companies have skillfully manipulated public opinion, however, by portraying environmentalists and even innocent forest creatures such as the spotted owl as the enemies of both the timber workers and the "free enterprise system." If the timber companies own the land, they feel they have the right to do with it as they damn well please, all in the name of the almighty dollar, even if it results in the ultimate devastation of both natural forests and local communities.

In fact, the best way to preserve jobs in forestry would be to practice sustainable logging. Hammond's essay "Clearcutting: Ecological and Economic Flaws" points out the ecological and economic fallacies of clearcutting. In the first place, clearcutting and reforestation do absolutely nothing to improve the health of the land, as some defenders of clearcutting claim. "We can plant trees, but we cannot plant a forest," Hammond writes. Timber companies are able to greenwash their images by boasting that they plant two trees for every one they cut. But monoculture tree farms consisting of only a single species for future harvest are no substitute for natural forests rich in biodiversity and possessing abundant plant and animal life. On the economic side, clearcutting is not the most commercially efficient method of forestry since it only considers short-term profits, not long-term sustainability. Clearcutting increases rather than decreases unemployment and is unnecessary in terms of global competition. What typically happens is that timber is extracted from an area at low wages, processed elsewhere at even lower wages, and then resold on the "global market" at significantly higher prices. While the corporations reap reams of profits, the poor underpaid logger ends up paying even more for his toilet paper. Sustainable forestry operations would keep production in local hands, to the benefit of both forests and local residents (although to the detriment of corporate profits and a growing national G.N.P.).

Clearcut is intended as an educational project and copies are being sent to a number of educators, politicians, journalists, businesspeople, and other influential decision-makers, many of whom still need to be persuaded that clearcutting should be abolished and replaced by sustainable forestry methods. This book should help immensely, but there's more that we as individuals can do. *Clearcut* ends with a "Call to Activism" that encourages us to educate ourselves and others about the current destruction being wrought by industrial forestry and to study sustainable alternatives; to acquire a first-hand appreciation for forest life by spending more time in forests ourselves and experiencing them; to reduce our personal consumption of wood and paper products (including packaging); to get involved with local fishery, wildlife, or soil restoration projects; to insist that governments take a no-compromise stand on forest regulations and

put scientific insights and ecological values before narrow commercial interests and corporate profits; and finally to start or join an environmental group that takes a stand against the war that is currently being waged on our forests. *Clearcut* has three large pages of extremely fine print listing the names and addresses of hundreds of environmental groups throughout North America that are opposed to clearcutting (along with the names and addresses of the big timber companies for anyone who would care to send them their opinions).

Here in Japan the Nature Conservation Society of Japan is one of the primary citizens groups concerned with forestry issues [see the January 1994 issue of JEM for an article on NACS-J's efforts to preserve Japan's beech forests]. In Japan domestic forestry issues are also frequently connected with golf course development and the import of timber from overseas rainforests and boreal forests. The directory *Japanese Working for a Better World* (available for ¥2,000 from Honnoki Publishers) lists 27 groups that are directly concerned with nature preservation in Japan.