

Instant economic gratification is killing the environment!

Soren Bondrup-Nielsen

18 February, 2017

Lately a heated debate has been taking place within the pages of this newspaper over forestry. One side argues that we need to clear-cut for lumber, pulp, and wood chips. It supports jobs, is good for the economy and it adds to the provincial coffers. Others argue that we are cutting at unsustainable rates, wildlife is endangered, we are losing carbon storage, soils are eroding and the kind of forests that are being clear-cut cannot regenerate. This is an age-old debate regarding resource extraction whether tar sands, fracking, forestry, fishing, hydropower or indeed agriculture; two different value systems at odds – economics versus ecology. When will they be reconciled?

Our current economic system sees humans as separate from nature and values nature as a store of resources for us to use as we see fit. The ecological perspective values nature as a system that we are a part of, which we cannot just use for our exclusive benefit. We must consider all the other organisms with whom we are cohabitants. All organisms survive by obtaining resources from each other but there is a limit to how much they can eat or store as fat. Humans, however, can turn resources into money and then there is no limit to how much you can accumulate.

Trees in a forest serve a multitude of functions from storing carbon, producing oxygen, providing habitat for other organisms, add nutrients to the soil, filters the air, moderate climate, provides shade, attracts people, provides beauty and much more. They can also be cut down and turned into lumber, be carved into art objects, be burned for heat, be ground down into pulp, be chipped, be turned into fiber for clothing and more. But the two value systems that see trees for these different uses rely on different types of arguments. It is as if the two sides speak different languages.

Many small woodlot owners understand the balance between the ecological and economic perspectives. They have a long-term interest in maintaining their forest in such a state that it can produce a continuous income into the future. They can see both the beauty and the monetary value of their forest and they manage their woodlots with pride. However, big industry economics just sees the bottom line on their accounting sheets for this quarter or this year. Maximum profit is made by minimizing the inputs – fees paid, labour, fuel costs and more while optimizing the amount of product produced. It is all about making profit now.

People holding the ecological perspective are not driven by economic gain but are devastated by seeing massive clear-cuts, disappearing wildlife, siltation in rivers, climate change and more. Their concern is for the environmental impact but this impact is generally not immediate but will occur in the future. Just witness global climate change. This was not an immediate response to pumping carbon dioxide into the air but it occurred gradually over many years. Similarly, the ecological impact of repeated clear-cutting will be felt in the future. And this is where economics and ecology are at odds – the benefit of economics is immediate but the ecological effects are delayed and since they are delayed economists can say “Now, now, show us the negative effects.”

This is where governments should step in and umpire the situation. But the card up the sleeve of industry is always jobs. Governments seem easily swayed by this argument and after all, they are there to look after the people but they are also there to safeguard the environment. They seem more swayed by big money; just witness the eventual moratorium on the cod fishery which was needed because the resource was driven to rock bottom. And who lost out? Local fishers who lost their livelihood; not industry for they just moved elsewhere.

But what about forestry? We are told that it supplies valuable jobs keeping rural communities vibrant. However, jobs are disappearing in the forestry. Direct employment in the forestry industries is going down. There are fewer people in the woods cutting trees down, fewer people in the pulp and paper industry and a couple of people can chip a whole stand of trees in no time. This is not where the jobs are. The only place where there is increase employment is in the value-added industries.

Thus, the solution to the ecology economics debacle is to focus attention to the value added wood industries. We can cut less and employ more people if the government would promote and back value-added wood industries. Cutting less would be good for forest ecology. If each tree cut has greater end value a higher price can be paid per trunk. With a higher price, selective harvesting of a few trees per stand would be economical and this would ensure forest stands could reach older ages which would be good for wildlife, soil, carbon sequestration and more. Value-added industries could turn out all manner of innovative wood products using labour found in Nova Scotia. With more people working tax revenue would help the Nova Scotia coffers and be good for the economy.

According to the Department of Natural Resources about three million hectares of Nova Scotia is classified as Working Land Base - it can be harvested for trees. In the last 25 years, more than one-third of this area has been clear-cut. At this rate forests in Nova Scotia will NOT reach the tender young age of 75 years. Further, according to the Department of Natural Resources, 27% of the land base should never be clear-cut and 24% could be clear-cut every 150 years or so based on natural disturbance regimes (Mapping Nova Scotia's Natural Disturbance Regimes). Surely it is time for the liberal government to stand up for the people of Nova Scotia and for the environment and put an end to clearcutting, at least on Crown Land, and promote value-added wood products industries employing Nova Scotians. This would be good for the ecology and good for the economy.