

TOUGH TRADE-OFFS: FORESTS, GRAVEL AND GROWTH

by

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When asked about their hopes for the future of the region most people who live here would like to preserve its beautiful natural setting. However, these hopes are beginning to bump into the realities of population growth.

Every twenty-four hours, 200 more people live in this state and each day 100 acres of forestland are permanently cleared to make way for houses, roads, stores and offices.

The bright side of population growth is economic opportunity, but the development driven by this growth can destroy natural systems. To escape this dark side of development, society must dare to discover ways for cities and natural areas to coexist over the long term.

Since the summer of 1990, a group called the Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust has been working to keep one familiar piece of green landscape - the scenic I-90 corridor - from becoming another urban strip. They saw the greatest threat to this nearby mountain gateway to be the creeping loss of its second growth forests - first to clear cuts and followed quickly by buildings and pavement.

• EVERY 24 HOURS, 200 more people reside in this state. A group called Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust has been working to keep the scenic Interstate-90 corridor from becoming another urban strip.

For most of this century, the environmental movement has pursued the public acquisition of remote roadless areas, wild rivers and important old growth habitat, but the growing of new forests on logged-off lands was largely left to market forces and regulation. As the century ends the vast majority of tree-growing land has been previously harvested.

Elected leaders from this region were among the first to recognize the public values of this huge second-growth resource. In the last twenty years, they have acquired timber lands threatened by development on nearby mountains like Tiger, Cougar, Squak, Si and Rattlesnake, and along popular rivers like the forks of the Snoqualmie.

Most of the area through which I-90 passes is covered by second-growth forests which can be reached easily by city dwellers for year-round outdoor recreation. While less than three thousand people hike into the alpine beauty of the Enchantment Lakes each year, more than

*As submitted by Mr. Ellis and substantially
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30,000 climb Mt. Si. Our lower elevation hills are resilient and capable of withstanding year-round use by large numbers of people. In a temperate marine climate, these lands also grow trees very well.

The trees in a “working forest” are as fundamental to a sustainable society as they are to the character of the I-90 Greenway. Even more importantly, growing trees of all sizes and kinds protect the water in our lakes and streams and purify the air we breathe.

While buildings and pavement concentrate and accelerate storm-water runoff, growing trees reduces flooding and silting by holding rainfall in the soil. While people, vehicles and manufacturing plants pump carbon dioxide into the air, trees (through photosynthesis) convert this carbon dioxide into oxygen which people and animals breathe, and into carbon which is stored in trunks, roots and branches. Even when trees are sawed into lumber, most of the carbon remains in the form of long-lived wood products.

Washington State has some of the cleanest air in the nation and scientists give a good share of the credit to our forests. While the nation as a whole absorbs 12 percent of its carbon dioxide emissions, Washington absorbs more than 50 percent. Sustained-yield working forests can mitigate carbon dioxide emissions. As more people crowd into the region, more trees will be needed to perform this function. It would be a matter of widespread concern if all the lower elevation forests in the Puget Sound basin were replaced by urban development.

What can we do about our disappearing forestland?

- We can cluster new development in strategic urban growth areas.
- We can plan all developments to accommodate more trees and to reduce the volume and intensity of storm water runoff.
- We can consolidate the checkerboard sections of forest land ownership inherited from the days of railroad building into more manageable blocks which better serve forest values.
- We can grow and harvest merchantable timber in ways which respect scenic, recreation and habitat qualities and at the same time help pay acquisition and maintenance costs of the forest.

The Greenway Trust encourages both public and private forest owners to engage in environmentally friendly forestry. Each summer hundreds of our young volunteers work to erase old logging road scars and restore damaged stream beds. Highly treated biosolids products from King County wastewater plants are being safely recycled on public and private forest land to improve tree growth and to add organic quality and water absorbing humus to gravelly soils.

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In addition, the Trust has asked our county, state and federal partners to acquire forest land which is threatened by development. These transactions with private owners are voluntary

with prices fixed by third-party appraisals.

To reduce tax expenditures for land purchases, we have encouraged equal-value land exchanges between public and private forest owners. In every trade there is both give and take, but the very act of consolidating checkerboard sections of ownership into continuous blocks should add value to both sides of most forest land trades.

This basic fact can produce genuine win-win transactions like the Champion Paper Company exchange with the State Department of Natural Resources and the Huckleberry and Cascade exchanges between Weyerhaeuser, Plum Creek and the Forest Service.

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Notwithstanding the impression created by the highly selective photographs in the Seattle Times investigative series "Trading Away the West," most environmental groups with first hand knowledge of the Huckleberry exchange, as well as federal judge William L. Dwyer who carefully reviewed it, have found this exchange to be in the public interest.

In the two federal land trades, old growth changed hands on both sides, often in ways which strengthened public riparian and roadless area continuity. It is true that many of the acres received by the public have been logged at one time or another, but northwest residents know that a forest which has been logged and replanted can become a forest again. A seedling cedar tree planted by a child today will grow too large to reach around when that child is 50 years old.

Everett White of the forest service was right on target when he said: "We can grow more trees but we can't grow more land."

The future value of public recreation lands located close to population centers is far greater than the future value of similar lands which are beyond such easy reach. This difference in future value should lead public agencies to acquire close in lands at forest land values before they become speculative development sites at development values.

Experience shows that forests which are owned by the public are less likely than private land to be converted to urban development. When the market value of land for development becomes greater than the same land kept in commercial forest uses, most private owners will choose to develop rather than wait for another crop of trees to mature.

In Washington State equal-value forestland trades have added thousands of acres to the publicly owned forest land base without the use of tax money. As a result, our children will still see forests on that land but will not be doomed to tend the checkerboard patchwork we inherited. Most important, the close-in forestlands which are acquired for long term recreation and resource use will escape permanent conversion to pavement and buildings.

Property exchanges are not the only choices that face those trying to protect second growth forestland.

This year, controversy arose around plans for a gravel mining operation on private forestland just east of North Bend. The Greenway Trust took a position in support of this proposal that has some people saying, "How could you?"

In fact however, the use of gravel is just as necessary to a sustainable society as the growing and harvesting of timber or the recycling of biosolids products.

In this state, 14 tons of gravel per person are consumed each year for schools, factories, houses, stores, offices, roads, bridges, sidewalks, garages and patios. Gravel is so important to current and future development that the Growth Management Act requires every county to maintain zoning for a 20-year supply.

We need to learn how to extract and process gravel in environmentally sensitive ways, but we can't pretend that we're not going to use gravel, or that it should always come from some other place.

Grouse Ridge, just east of North Bend adjoining Ken's Truck Town, is a 2,280 acre gateway to the beautiful recreation lands of the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River. With industrial zoning right up to its edge, it's the kind of large parcel that could easily change from forest use to commercial or residential development. Keeping this land in trees has been a long-time Greenway goal.

There was one big problem with acquiring the forests on Grouse: they lie on top of massive gravel deposits valued at more than \$200 million. Public agencies might be able to buy ordinary forestland but could not afford to pay the market value of these huge gravel deposits.

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For a long time this property had been zoned and used for gravel mining and the landowner, Weyerhaeuser, had a legal right to continue to extract and sell the gravel.

When Greenway representatives approached the company in 1997, it was already planning to start a major gravel operation. We intervened because there was a chance to set a higher standard for gravel mining and to obtain for public agencies an opportunity to buy forestland around the edges of the mine site.

In April of 1998, Weyerhaeuser and the Greenway Trust signed a memorandum outlining steps which could lead to the transfer of most of the Grouse Ridge forestland into public stewardship. The memorandum also committed the private nonprofit Greenway Trust to support an appropriate gravel operation on land being retained by Weyerhaeuser. In return Weyerhaeuser promised to develop a model mining program, to protect the underground aquifers, to extract gravel in 5 year stages, to replant trees on each stage after gravel is removed and to donate those reforested lands to King County.

As a result of negotiations and appraisals during May and June of this year, the State

Department of Natural Resources, King County and the Trust for Public Land were able to purchase more Grouse Ridge land at a lower cost than the preliminary memorandum had contemplated.

A 255 acre gravel deposit located north of the Middle Fork River was donated in fee by Weyerhaeuser to King County to secure a valuable income-tax deduction for the Company and will never be mined.

The Paul Allen Forest Protection Foundation generously provided the Trust for Public Land with funds to complete its purchase of nearly three miles of mature Grouse Ridge forest fronting on the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River as a natural preserve.

It is becoming clearer every day that unless Washington citizens invest now in public infrastructure and environmental protection we will leave a less attractive and productive region for our children than the one we inherited from our parents. And whatever investments we decide to make in public facilities or natural resources will have to serve a much larger state population – equal to more than twenty new Tacomas by the year 2020.

In the long run all of this gateway to the magnificent Middle Fork valley will be permanently covered with growing trees.

To sustain growing trees on close in land over the long term will require an appropriate balance of working forests and natural preserves, the safe recycling of beneficial biosolids products, and careful stewardship by public users of recreation land.

As a rule of thumb, whenever someone proposes an action which affects forestland, we should find out whether the proposal improves the prospect for long term forest use. If public acquisition is desirable, we should ask whether there

is an acceptable way to pay the public costs. And, we should insist on knowing how the affected land and water resource will look thirty years later.

In the short run, the Grouse Ridge purchases have protected three-fourths of its trees while a large gravel deposit is being used to meet regional building needs. In the long run all of this gateway to the magnificent Middle Fork valley will be permanently covered with growing trees.

Hard choices seldom please everyone – but the efforts of the Greenway coalition to date have helped the I-90 corridor become the only Interstate Highway in America to be designated a National Scenic Byway.

With a little more work, this combination of history, scenery and natural resources should remain a public treasure well into the next millennium.

James R. Ellis is president of the Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust, established in 1990.