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BENIGN NEGLECT

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Benign neglect, at best, is a state of good intention without action. Often times, the failures of omission have more dire consequences than errors of commission. In other words, what we don't do can be just as important as what we do do. Forests are far too often "managed" through benign neglect.

Doing "nothing" generates opportunity for unpleasant things. A vegetable garden ignored is a garden lost. Forests are much the same way.

Many a well-intentioned forest owner allows "nature" to take its course, thinking that nature "knows" best. Nature "knows" nothing. However, natural processes have predictability. More often than not, this leads to unintended and undesirable consequences.

In a way, "natural" forests don't exist, at least not in the romantic sense of some set of pre-human environmental conditions. We have inherited a legacy shaped by historic over-harvest, wildfires, and exotic species introductions. Therefore, forests can no longer follow an entirely natural course. The notion of returning to "pre-Euro-American" forest conditions is not only ecologically impossible, but it's absurd from the social and economic standpoints as well. Forests may "look" natural to the casual observer, but the way something looks is an exceptionally poor indicator of forest health and quality.

Looking to the future, and imagining what might be, is a far more valuable exercise than benign neglect. Securing a healthy and vigorous forest that meets the demands of society takes more than good intentions; it takes management and a sense of community welfare. We often forget the importance of forests, other than for "trophy" possessions or a place to stick a house into. Forests are essential elements for our survival. Relegating forests to a mere recreational role is extremely short-sighted and calls into question a range of social justice issues. Owning forest land opens up a rich and exciting set of purpose-driven possibilities.

Forest resources produce valuable commodities. Some folks may not acknowledge their personal use of wood-based products, but wood is just as vital to our livelihood as oil, coal, gas, metals, water, and any other raw material. One main difference, of course, is that wood is renewable. If we put our collective minds to the task, more of our supply could be produced domestically, and responsibly.

Forest resources also have a wide range of non-commodity values, such as wildlife habitat, water and soil protection, recreation, etc. Recognition of these values has been long-in-coming in some cases, but they are also very important values that can be enhanced through management.

Benign neglect can lead to the degradation of all these values. There are numerous examples. Timber quality and dollar values decline long before the trees become outwardly unhealthy. As stream-side forests crumble, they may not be replaced by new forests. This can lead to deterioration of both stream quality and trout habitat. Thoughtless recreation has introduced and spread a variety of exotic and invasive species. The patterns of second home and retirement construction are alarming. Forests that grow too dense will lose structure, affecting wildlife habitat, and slowed tree growth creates a forest under stress, an unhealthy condition. Too much shade or too much light can prevent the regeneration of many trees, shrubs, and flowers. Mis-managed and unmanaged forests frequently have less tree species diversity, making the forest more susceptible to diseases and insects. The ravages of beech bark disease in the eastern Upper Peninsula and the spread of oak wilt across the region are good case studies of forest damage tied to human neglect.

Forest management seems to be one of those activities with numerous win-win outcomes and is the only

sensible choice to deal with the increasing pressures on our forest resources. Cultivating a sense of stewardship through better management becomes a cherished mission. Not only can competitive and renewable revenues be enjoyed, but all the other benefits of forest ownership can be increased, and forests can be better protected. Forestry is a solution to many of our environmental challenges. We practice benign neglect at our own peril.

As an MSU Extension forester, Bill Cook provides educational programming for the entire Upper Peninsula. His office is located at the MSU Upper Peninsula Tree Improvement Center near Escanaba. The Center is the headquarters for three MSU Forestry properties in the U.P., with a combined area of about 8,000 acres. A collection of these newspaper articles, back to July 1997, can be viewed on the following website: <http://michigansaf.org/ForestInfo/Newspaper/0000-Directory.htm> or under the "Forest Info" button of <http://michigansaf.org>.