

Seventh American Forest Congress

Many Voices -- A Common Vision

Reports from participants in the Seventh American Forest Congress

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Seventh American Forest Congress: Many Voices--One Vision

by [L.Keville Larson](#)

Depending on the activities in progress and one's point of view, the Seventh American Forest Congress might, at different times, have been compared to a town meeting, a three ring circus, international peace negotiations or a Chinese fire drill. The stated purpose of the congress was "to assemble Americans concerned about forests and forest policy, meet for several days to determine areas of agreement, and then build on those areas of agreement to plan for the future".

For more than 1,500 attendees (February 20-24, 1996, Washington, D.C.), it was certainly a significant experience and may prove to be an historic event. The experience included excitement, work, fun, intrigue, emotional moments, learning, understanding and hope.

Reactions tend to be highly individual; mine was strongly positive. To me it is obvious:

1. there is much common ground,
2. we must work to understand other views, and
3. those with extreme views are a small minority.

It was a diverse group. Thirty percent were private non-industrial owners. The 1,307 pre-registrants, from nearly all states and several foreign countries, described themselves as fitting into one or more of the following categories:

Registration category	#
School teachers (K-12)	14
Scientists and college professors	177
Students	85
Extension agents and consultants	92
People who help landowners manage ecosystems	593

Members of "green" or advocacy organizations	584
Support forest preservation	455
Work for public agency	282
Work in community development or management	207
Work for industry or business	331
Work for an association	111

The participants were seated at tables in groups of 8 to 10. Each group was purposely composed of participants with varying viewpoints. At my table there were two professors, a landowner, a student, a consultant, a Wilderness Society Vice President, an urban forester and a Soil and Water Administrator. During the four days of discussing issues we came to know, respect and like each other. Women were well represented; minorities, less so. One woman remarked that it was difficult at first but she had become comfortable with the eight men at her table - one of whom is the U. S. Forest Service Chief.

The first exercise instructed each person to share one aspect of today's forestry they felt good about, and one that was not so good. After that the work was hard, and there were stressful moments. Tears of emotion or frustration were seen; in one case, from an environmental representative upset that an activist, who stormed the stage and grabbed the microphone, had damaged their cause. There were no real disruptions of the proceedings, but there were pep rallies for special interest groups, rumors of a walkout and in one case a late night call trying to influence organizers. These activities, from both industrial and environmental interests, added excitement and intrigue but were very minor compared to the levels of agreement being found at the tables.

An astounding 93 to 97 percent of the participants said they could support the following vision statements that in the future our forests will:

1. be held in a variety of public, private, tribal, land grant, and trust ownerships by owners whose right, objectives, and expectations are respected and who understand and accept their responsibilities as stewards.
2. be enhanced by policies that encourage both public and private investment in long-term sustainable forest management.
3. sustainably provide a range of goods, services, experiences and values that contribute to community well-being, economic opportunity, social and personal satisfaction, spiritual and cultural fulfillment, and recreational enjoyment.
4. be maintained and enhanced across the landscape, expanding through reforestation and restoration where ecologically, economically, and culturally appropriate, in order to meet the needs of an expanding human population.
5. be shaped by natural forces and by human actions that reflect the wisdom and values of

an informed and engaged public, community and social concerns, sound scientific principles, local and indigenous knowledge and the need to maintain options.

6. be managed consistent with strategies and policies that foster forest integrity and maintain a broad range of ecological, economic, and social values and benefits.
7. be sustainable; support biological diversity; maintain ecological and evolutionary processes; and be highly productive.

This high level of support was reached after considerable word-smithing based on participants comments from the tables. For instance, support for the first element above increased considerably when it was changed from "be held in a variety of forms of public and private ownership by owners who accept the rights and responsibilities to fulfill both public and private interests." The meanings and inferences of the two are very different. Attention was paid to every word and the participants were sensitive to every nuance. Granted the statements above--along with six others that garnered 54 to 74 percent support--are general, but collectively their ideas strongly support a balance of economic and environmental aspects, rejecting the extremes.

Many times it was obvious there were large gaps in understanding and appreciation of conditions outside ones region of the country. For example, Southerners might have given little thought to adding tribal, land grant or trust ownerships as categories separate from public or private. But these were vital to tribal interests for some Southwesterners where land granted and put in trust by the King of Spain is considered neither private nor public. There were also words such as "ecosystem" that carried negative connotation for some regions and were usually eliminated. It was hard for one logger from Mississippi to identify with the lady carrying the stuffed monkey to symbolize all the monkeys killed from cutting trees. He politely told her "Ma'am, where I come from, there ain't no monkeys in the tress." Angry environmentalists, who captured media attention by lobbying hard for a repeal of the timber salvage bill, were also dealing with a primarily regional issue. One result of that bill was to allow logging in some stands of old growth, overriding environmental laws and precluding judicial appeals.

The Forest Congress rejected repeal proposals but did express support for the principle that "citizens and interests have the right to seek administrative and judicial review to ensure that land management decisions comply with existing laws...".

One of the more interesting aspects of the Congress was watching the Organizational Development professionals who had been attracted by this largest-ever interactive facilitated process. It worked on the whole, but there were some failures. A Vision statement agreement was reached, but an agreement on Principles was not. By trying to include every person and issue, a session for missing principles was held. Forty-three principles were added to the original 18 produced by the groups. This session was a design flaw because it overwhelmed the process and left no time to complete the work.

One of the last exercises was a meeting with people from your home state or area to discuss the next local-level steps. My home table listed as next steps:

1. Provide tax treatment for timberland which promotes long-term ownership and management including: annual expensing of management costs, repeal passive loss, provide capital gain treatment for timber and removal of the destructive effects of the

death taxes.

2. Promote a wide variety of land conditions and management, from preservation of unique areas and wilderness to areas used for a wide variety of private and public purposes.
3. Nourish working relationships such as those demonstrated at the Seventh American Forest Congress and the Alabama Forest Roundtable through follow-up meeting and demonstration tours of interested parties.
4. Coordinate with public and private groups to develop fact-based information to be used in the education of resource professionals, landowners and citizens (including youth) about the methods and contributions of forest stewardship.
5. Support adequate funding for research and technology transfer.
6. Ensure passage of the Alabama Private Property Protection Act.

The promise in the Seventh American Forest Congress theme "many voices-one vision" was apparent enough during the meeting to change the attitudes of the few extremists who had planned a walkout. "To find common ground" was the powerful inspirational message from Native American Jamie Pinkham that closed the meeting and left participants highly motivated. The success of the Congress is that many seeds of hope and commitment to working with others were planted. The result should be better policies, practices and relationships at local, regional and national levels.

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