

What is best for the Forest?

By David Falkenham, UNHCE Grafton County Forester

I am very fortunate to have a job that takes me to all corners of Grafton County, working with private forest landowners to help them manage their forests and achieve their objectives. An individual's forest management objectives vary from property to property and may include anything from improving wildlife habitat, increasing biodiversity, or cutting timber for extra income.

The questions I receive are too numerous to count; however, one of the most common, yet not so easily answered questions is "What is the best thing I can do for my forest?". This is an honorable question and I am glad to hear it as often as I do, but the answer is more philosophical than it is scientific.

Human beings have been using and managing the forest for thousands of years. Early Native Americans used the forest for building material, gathering plant foods and hunting animals. They commonly burned the forest to create better wildlife habitat, hence better hunting conditions. This burning likely created a higher diversity of wild berries for human collection as well. Thus the manipulation of forests for human purposes has been going on for a long time. Although these early natives were improving their situation for living, they were also improving wildlife habitat and diversity so, in a sense, they were doing work that was good for the forest.

Hunting, fishing, trapping, walking, running and riding our mountain bikes are all common endeavors that we enjoy in the forest, thus we need to protect them for these purposes. Cutting trees gives us wood, which everybody uses everyday. As my predecessor likes to say; "Wood is the most useful material known to man". We use wood for building houses, cabinets, furniture, utensils, heating our homes, and of course all common forms of paper are made from wood. Thus we need trees for our survival.

To achieve a balance of growing timber for our physical needs and conserving forests for our psychological and recreation needs, the art and science of forestry (forest management) was born in Europe and imported to the United States over 100 years ago. This new field of science led to a modern conservation movement that protects forests for wildlife and biodiversity while simultaneously growing and cutting trees for our personal use. This conservation movement also led to the creation of our National Forest System and the US Forest Service. Names such as Gifford Pinchot, Aldo Leopold, and of course Teddy Roosevelt were leaders and scientists at the spearhead of this movement.

In Grafton County nearly 40% of the forested landscape is public land, either State, County or National Forest. However, the majority of our forests (over 60%) are privately owned. These private ownerships come in all shapes and sizes and the landowners have great resources available to them to help them manage their forests and meet most or all of their ownership objectives. My job, as County Forester, is to talk with these landowners, walk their landscape, and make recommendations that will hopefully lead to a lifetime of enjoyment from a person's forest. My time often leads to the hiring of licensed professional foresters who carry out the on-the-ground work that improves wildlife habitat, harvests timber, increases tree growth and regeneration, creates roads and trails for landowners to use, and increases biodiversity.

So what is best for the forest? Given the long history of land use in this country, that is the toughest question of them all. My feeling is that if we are continuously *conserving* and *protecting* forested landscapes (both private and public), sustainably *harvesting* timber for our use with an eye towards diversity, *managing* agricultural land to grow our food and enhance our overall health, and *improving* our perspective by walking in the woods as often as we can, we are doing what is best for the forest and all those who visit it.