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Growing up in Chicago, Irland spent summers in northern Wisconsin on a scout camp staff. He earned his B.S. at Michigan State; an M.S. at University of Arizona. He served in the Army in Vietnam, then earned a Ph.D. at Yale. He was then a U.S. Forest Service economist in the South. During ten years in Maine state government he served as Forest Insect Manager during the middle of the last budworm outbreak, was Director of Public Lands, and then State Economist. Irland was a junior author of sections of both the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) and the U.S. National Assessment on Climate Change. From 2003 to 2010 he taught Financial Analysis fall semesters at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, including courses on professional ethics. For more than 25 years he has performed timber supply analyses and assessments of markets and industry trends across the Northern US and nearby Canada, for public and private clients.

With well over 300 publications, he is a regular contributor to trade and professional publications. He is author of 5 books, with one more in the works. His work on forests has brought him on study tours and lecture visits to Canada, China, India, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria, Greece, Bhutan, France, Yugoslavia, Mexico, and Ukraine. He is a Fellow of the Society of American Foresters.