

Moore Sees Both Forests and Trees

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I heard last week from one of the Twin Cities' busiest media relations agents. He asked me, as a favor, to have breakfast with a client who "is not beloved by environmental activists." It seemed this client is so unbeloved among right-thinking people (or maybe that's left-thinking people) that his press agent figured I might be one of the few journalists in town reckless enough to meet with the man.

There may have been some sly (and successful) flattery in that. In fact, Patrick Moore, the client, got a hearing from several local journalists and radio hosts.

But at some deeper level, the worry that few would listen to Moore reflects the bitter intolerance that surrounds many environmental disputes today. It's a storm of philosophical passions already buffeting the Bush administration.

Patrick Moore, for his part, is indeed despised by many militant environmentalists. A website has been established in his dishonor, called "Patrick Moore Is a Big Fat Liar." He is routinely denounced as a "Judas" in the environmental world—which nicely reflects the religious-war quality of these debates.

Moore's central concern is forests and how best to ensure their survival, health and restoration. Increasingly, militant environmental groups are pressing for dramatic reductions in logging around the world, and a curtailment of human use of wood. Moore's heresy is his argument that in truth the well-being of forests depends on making more, not less, economic use of trees through responsibly managed forestry.

What makes Moore's argument particularly intriguing—and infuriating to his critics—is that he is something of a recovering environmental zealot. He was a founding member of Greenpeace, and the confrontational group's one-time director. But he also is the son of a logging family in British Columbia, and a forest scientist, and he has come to believe that "much of the environmental movement has gone astray on the subject of forests."

Today, Moore is a consultant and spokesman for the forestry industry. He calls himself "an environmentalist in the political center," a species that may belong on some endangered list. His critics call him a sellout.

This is one of many environmental disputes where lay persons, not least journalists, are nearly helpless to weigh the merit of starkly differing scientific claims, or to identify the point where science leaves off and ideological or economic agendas begin.

But Moore makes a number of common sense claims that are worth pondering.

Above all, Moore argues that it's by using trees that we ensure the survival and growth of forests. That's because of the basic economic fact that somebody will supply what people demand and pay for. When you buy a piece of wood, Moore says, you are not so much destroying a tree as placing an order for a new tree. He calls wood "the most renewable and environmentally friendly of all materials used to build our civilization," replaceable only by steel, concrete or plastic, whose production is far more environmentally damaging.

Moore says the great threat to forests and the "biodiversity" they support is and always has been agriculture, not forestry. While most people find pastures and hay fields more picturesque than new clear cuts, land can never support trees so long as it is farmed. A clear cut managed for forestry, by contrast, will immediately sport more biodiversity than a soybean field and will soon (in the time scale of nature) become a forest again.

Forestry represents "reforestation," Moore says. Farming represents "deforestation." He adds that if one wants to help save the tropical rainforest, you should boycott tropical fruits and crops and buy tropical woods, not the other way around.

Truth is, the ag lobby may ultimately have more reason to denounce Moore than lovers of forests. His line of reasoning implies that if governments—not least in the U.S.—weren't subsidizing much surplus farm production, much crop land could be economically returned to forest, with tremendous benefits for biodiversity and in the battle against (possible) global warming.

Moore notes that many natural forces such as fire, volcanoes, disease, storms (like the blow down two years back in the Boundary Waters) "disturb" forests much as logging does. Historically glaciers have deforested whole continents. But forests recover from all these disruptions, and they recover from logging, too—especially because the timber industry's business is to help them recover.

Moore emphasizes that forestry must be conducted more responsibly than it was in the past, in light of today's improved environmental science. He supports efforts to safeguard wilderness areas from all logging and development. He acknowledges that questions exist about the relative ecological value of some second-growth forests and tree "plantations."

But Moore, a persuasive exponent of the advancing philosophy of market-based environmentalism, makes an intriguing case that, under proper management, we will save and expand the world's forest more readily by using trees than by "protecting" them from earning their keep. Ω