

VIEWPOINT

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EcoLogic

Message to the U.S.: Save the rain forest

For a decade or more, Americans have decried the destruction of the rain forests, and urged Brazil and other nations to set aside these "lungs of the world."

Yet President Clinton is hatching plans for the continued destruction of the United States' own rain forests, the awe-inspiring ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest.

The irony involved seems to escape Clinton, whose first draft of The Forest Plan — which calls for logging one-fifth of the ancient forests under federal control — remains in a public comment period until Thursday.

The plan consists of 1,000 pages, which environmentalists are still poring over, and the 21-page summary released by the White House is vague to the point of rhetoric. But it's clear that politicians chose the alternative that donates the most forest to timber interests. It's known as Option 9, a slightly adapted version of the worst-case environmental scenario.

The folly of choosing the most destructive option must be apparent to Vice President Al Gore, co-author of the plan. In his brilliant 1992 book, "Earth in the Balance," Gore says this about attempts to portray the old growth issue as jobs vs. owls: "But if the remaining 10 percent of old growth forest is logged out, as the timber industry prefers, the jobs will be lost anyway. The only question is whether the effort to create new jobs will begin now or later, after the forest is completely gone."

To the credit of Clinton and Gore, their plan does make a serious effort to retrain timber industry workers for other jobs, with \$1.2 billion allocated for job training over five years. But it has some serious flaws when it comes to protecting the remaining 8 million to 9 million acres of old growth forest in the Pacific Northwest, which stretches from Washington through Oregon

and into northern California.

I had the chance to see some of the forests involved during a visit to California in the summer of 1991. A friend and I walked through Redwood State Forest, located in northern California near Arcata and Eureka. As the towering redwoods engulfed us, a feeling of their ancient presence

descended upon me. It seemed a cathedral to nature in all its potent beauty.

It didn't take long to understand how these trees could boast a living mass — biomass, in scientific terms, comparable to human weight — 15 times more massive than El Yunque's main forest type.

These California coastal redwood greater than 1,000 years old weigh in with a biomass in the trunks alone of 3,460 tons per hectare, according to an article in Science (Vol. 204, 1979). This compares to about 225 tons per hectare for the tabonuco forest in El Yunque, said Frederick Scatena of the International Institute of Tropical Forestry based in Río Piedras. And even the Amazonian rain forests of the highest stature rarely surpass 600 tons per hectare, he said.

The Douglas fir and western hemlock stands that comprise the majority of the area targeted by the Clinton forest plan also loom large, with the trunks of a 400-year-old or so stand weighing in with a biomass of 1,590 tons per hectare, about 2½ times that of the lushest tropical rain forest.

With numbers like these, it's no wonder the United States doesn't practice what it preaches about saving the rain forest. Former President Bush was the most practiced of the side-mouthed preachers, and even attempted to use the nation's record on forests as an example for the rest of the world to follow during the June 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

Hopefully, the other nations won't take the bait, as the United States is the world's top timber producer by a long shot. It held 25 percent of the world share in 1988, compared with Brazil's relatively meager share of 4 percent, according to statistics from the Food and Agriculture Organization cited in the July/August 1990 issue of World Watch.

Similarly, the United States has destroyed 90 percent or more of the Pacific Northwest rain forests. Brazil, meanwhile, has razed a relatively small 19 percent of its Amazon rain forests, according to Jeff Norton of the Rainforest Action Network.

Even more of the ancient forests would have been gone by now if the U.S. agencies overseeing the forests had their way. The agencies that have a role in "managing" the old growth forests include the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. In actuality, their policy has been to protect timber interests at the expense of the public interest.

But in 1989 they were blocked from selling off more of these treasures by the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, which used the Endangered Species Act, aimed the spotted owl, as a tool to halt the destruction of this ancient ecosystem.

One of the pair of attorneys behind this successful strategy, Victor M. Sher, explained that the spotted owl is only one

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The old growth rain forests in the Pacific Northwestern United States, shown above in their natural state, have come to resemble the image at right. The forests have been decimated, with only 10 percent remaining now. President Clinton's plan for these forests doesn't do enough to protect them, argues Melanie Lenart and a variety of environmentalists.

Photos courtesy of The Wilderness Society, based in San Francisco



of about 600 species uniquely tied to these old growth forests. The forests themselves also have important ecological roles: they protect streams, and therefore the life within them such as salmon; they store carbon, which originates from carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas behind the predicted heating up of the planet; and they prevent erosion, especially on the steeper slopes where most of the remaining forests lie. "It's a complex web of life that has

been largely ignored or trashed through decades of mismanagement by government and the timber industry," Sher said in a phone interview.

The Forest Plan, as it stands now, won't keep the system viable over the long-term, Sher said, although he hopes they'll be able to resolve these problems outside of the courtroom if possible.

But just in case that doesn't work, his group and others made a deal with the

Clinton administration on Oct. 7 to keep the legal avenue open. They agreed to support the logging of 83 million "board-feet" of trees to head off the Clinton threat to wield a so-called "sufficiency" argument that would make it immune to court challenges.

The sufficiency argument was a favorite weapon of both Ronald Reagan and George Bush, whose failings were so great when it comes to the old growth system that even Clinton's Forest Plan looks good in comparison.

Throughout the Reagan-Bush era of the 1980s, loggers feasted on 5 billion board-feet a year, so they're still complaining about Clinton's generous offer to hand over 1.2 billion a year.

Even during this spree of the '80s, loggers were losing jobs — with mechanization and raw log exports to blame for much of the unemployment.

The effect of mechanization on timber-related jobs was revealed, for example, in Oregon, where industry employment declined by 15 percent in the 1980s even as timber harvests reached record levels, according to the World Watch article. And one of every four Pacific Northwest trees harvested in 1989 was sent abroad to countries like Japan, which quadruple the wood's value merely by processing it.

The Clinton plan links the exporting of logs to the decline of local mills: By 1988, the number of sawmills in Oregon had dropped from 300 to 165 in 20 years, while those in Washington fell from 182 to 118 in a decade. Yet the Clinton plan still doesn't include a ban on all raw log exports as environmentalists have demanded, although it does close a tax loophole that actually allowed private log exporters to gain a tax credit by selling out these natural resources.

Environmentalists also see trouble ahead for the old growth forests on public lands that are supposedly in reserve. They are still subject to commercial harvest, partly through "salvage" sales, where timber companies go into areas struck by wind storms or fires to get what they can. They often use the opportunity to take more than they should, explains Bill Arthur, northwest regional director of the Sierra Club, even though they are allegedly under the supervision of federal agencies.

"These are the very same agencies that logged these forests to the brink of destruction," Arthur said during a telephone conversation Wednesday.

His concern is echoed by Jeff St. Clair of the Portland-based Forest Watch, who suspects that timber interests will use the lack of inviolate reserves and other loopholes to harvest twice the official amount. St. Clair also notes in an Aug. 10 New York Times story that the plan also calls for opening up 2.3 million of the 5 million acres of old growth forest west of the Cascades.

The consensus is in from environmentalists: Clinton's Forest Plan fails to protect the Pacific Northwest rain forests. Maybe it's time the United States took a lesson from Brazil.

The Sierra Club urges those who would like to comment about this dilemma to push for Option 1, which does the most to protect these old growth forests. To comment, call the White House Office of Environmental Policy at 202-456-6225 or write them at Room 360, Old Executive Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20501. The official comment period ends Thursday but comments will be accepted until the final plan is prepared.