

What Woodlot Owners Want: Compromising sovereignty for leverage

Transcript of speech delivered by Jonathan Schurman, Ph.D., woodlot consultant and sole proprietor of Stoic Land Use

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Forest conservation is an issue of global concern. Every place confronts it and dealing with it comes at a significant cost. These costs manifest in many ways, from the opportunity costs associated with keeping land forested, to enforcement costs associated with protecting reserves.

Thus, it must be recognized that whatever conservation targets we establish here on PEI will come with a price tag, and these required funds will necessarily come from two potential sources: increased productivity (e.g., from more efficient management) or through redistribution of public funds. A balance must be struck, but it is worth saying that every dollar generated through increased productivity stretches the value returned from money redistribution to strict conservation.

Today, I aim to articulate my belief that a major fraction of these necessary conservation funds can be generated in the form of landowner equity, by improving access to woodlot management practices that will increase both the economic and ecological value of our forest cover over time. I believe that these are the management practices that landowners want, they just don't have the **leverage** to implement management plans that are best suited to their goals at their current scale.

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When we discuss issues of great societal concern, we must deal with two deep considerations: We need a confident understanding of **the way things are**, and a clear vision of **the ways things ought to be**. Understanding the way things *are* is an empirical question, in forest we follow methodologies to conduct forest inventories. However, the way things *ought* to be is more complicated, because it deals with values and values are

subjective. However, a helpful place to start is to frame a set of targets in general enough terms so that all stakeholders can agree on what changes should constitute progress. My business involves deliberating these values with prospective clients and the following has emerged as something of a slogan, that forests should be:

-a source of wealth for landowners,

-a source of joy for society, and

-a source of habitat for wildlife. And many have agreed with that sentiment.

However, even after establishing what success looks like, we still must recognize that entities will value these targets differently and would choose different paths to achieve them. Thus, what ends needing to happen is to proportionately represent the views of varied stakeholders in some type of vision statement for how to best achieve forest conservation on PEI.

This proportionality is what I refer to as leverage: your ability to get what you want out of a negotiation is leverage. In my experience in consulting, I often encounter landowners needing to make largely unsatisfying compromises.

So, I believe that in pursuing a vision of forest conservation on PEI, it is crucial to ask what landowners **want**, and to understand what they currently **have**. Not least of all because I believe that failing to approach the process of regulating activity on private woodlots as a negotiation (based on fair value propositions) is unlikely to generate satisfying outcomes.

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So what do landowners want?

Small landowners – timber revenue is small relative to the enjoyment of forested land – these people want better access to ecological forestry (good)

Farmers – by and large, farmer's need revenue, and this fits well within a large-scale forest conservation strategy. We need to have a certain percentage of our land dedicated to high production forestry, and I can't think of a better place to practice this than in on-farm woodlots.

Large landowners – Large landowners own enough land to balance extractive and non-extractive benefits, but they predominately care about efficiency. Often good stewards of

land, and good stewards of capital. Furthermore, these large landowners care about something that all private landowners have, but large landowners most of all, which is sovereignty.

Sovereignty: 300 years ago, this was an island of serfs under absentee landlords and the right to private property was hard earned. I believe it will be folly to proceed without respecting this.

That said, I believe that the path to helping landowners to better achieve their management goals, leading to more wealth, joy and habitat, is through co-operative management, where landowners will increasingly register their property into a district management plan, and be treated as shareholders in land which is more readily reclassified or rezoned into an asset category that is more reflective of the values of forest as a natural resource, rather than a luxury commodity, which it is Moreso treated as now.

I further believe that this path will lead to greatly improved capitalization of forested land, which will make buying land more approachable to a wider range of income earners, possibly even opening options for long-term financing, making it easier to have a stake in forestry without needing to buy acreage in lump sum transactions.

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Paths to co-operative management:

The best feature of pursuing co-operative management is that we have all the elements we need right now.

1. The first element is **The Sustainable Forest Alliance**, which is well on its way to establishing the appropriate framework to integrate island woodlots into district management plans.
2. The second is the **Forest Enhancement Program**. We have an exceptional staff of provincial forest technicians; they are an absolute joy to work with.

But, we must absolutely recognize the bottleneck of needing to reach and consider in detail the needs of 16 000 woodlot owners. For this, we need improve organization at the community level, and I can think of no better partners in this endeavor than the numerous environmental NGOs across PEI. Your help is greatly needed, and you can consider this an open invitation to start getting together and discussing how we can collaborate and make this happen.

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Summary:

Thus, to wrap up, I fully recognize the need to balance increased productivity and appropriate redistribution of public funds. I care deeply about the need to improve biodiversity in PEI woodlots. However, I don't know of any jurisdiction that has achieved satisfying forest conservation results, without an efficiently run and productive forest product sector. Having said that, I strongly believe that the goals of the average landowner are in broad overlap with our conservation targets, and that if we can proceed together, while understanding the need to protect the rights of private property, we will establish a forest conservation policy that leads to more wealth for landowners, more joy in society and more wildlife in our woodlands.