



**LIVING WITH FORESTS:
ESSAYS ON STEWARDSHIP**

UNDERSTANDING FORESTS AS LIVING PROCESSES, AND OUR PLACE WITHIN
THEM - TOLD THROUGH THE LENS OF A LATE-SUCCESSIONAL FORESTER

AN ESSAY SERIES BY: MICHAEL C. SNYDER



Greenfire
Enterprises

Essay 1:

Forests Are a Verb

Forests are often described as places.

We measure them in acres. We describe them by ownership, habitat type, or recreational value. Forests appear in conversation as objects - things that exist, things we protect, things we visit.

It is natural to speak of forests as if they are static and stable — bounded and largely unchanging unless something happens to them.

But the longer one spends in the woods, the harder it becomes to hold that view. Over time, we begin to realize that this way of speaking may be quietly misleading us.

Because forests are not just places.

They are processes.

A forest is not simply a thing. A forest is something that happens.

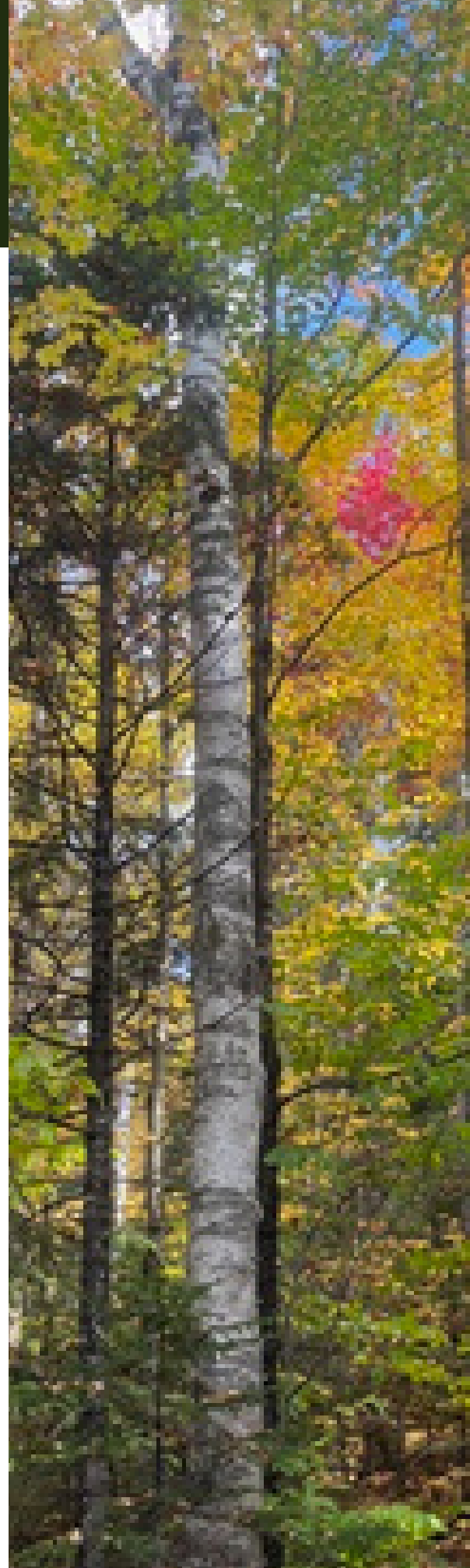
Forests are processes unfolding across time — exchanges of energy, water, nutrients, disturbance, and renewal. Trees grow, compete, die, decay, and give rise to new life. Soil forms and reforms. Light shifts. Species arrive and depart.

Nothing remains fixed for long, even when change is too gradual for us to notice day to day.

Seen this way, “forest” functions less as a noun than as a verb.

This distinction may sound semantic, but it shapes how we understand not just forests, but also their stewardship. When we think of forests primarily as static objects, our instinct is to preserve them exactly as they appear at a given moment. Change feels like loss. Intervention feels suspect. Stability becomes the goal.

Yet ecological reality tells a different story.





Forests have never been static. Windstorms rearrange canopies. Ice storms reshape crowns. Insects and disease alter species composition. Fire, flooding, and human activity have long influenced forest structure and development. What we often interpret as disruption is frequently part of how forests sustain themselves.

Health, in ecological terms, is not permanence.

It is function — the capacity to adapt, recover, and renew.

Forests do things.

They filter water, regulate climate, cycle nutrients, store carbon, shelter biodiversity, and shape the landscapes in which human communities live.

These functions arise not from stillness, but from continuous interaction among living and nonliving systems.

When forests are seen primarily as places, change can feel like loss. When forests are understood as processes, change can instead be seen as transition. Both reactions are human. Both are understandable. But the distinction matters — especially when we begin to think about stewardship. Understanding forests as verbs helps clarify why stewardship sometimes includes action.

Forestry, at its best, is not an attempt to control forests, but to participate thoughtfully in processes already underway.

A well-designed timber harvest, for example, may create conditions for regeneration, diversify habitat, or restore structural complexity diminished by past land use. In other situations, restraint — allowing natural processes to proceed with minimal intervention — may be the wiser course.

Both approaches acknowledge the same reality: forests are dynamic systems, not static artifacts.

In both cases, the goal is not to hold a forest in a particular condition, but to help sustain its capacity to continue.

This requires patience.

It also requires a willingness to see beyond a single moment in time.

In much of the northeastern United States, this dynamism is especially important to recognize because our forests are relatively young in historical terms. Widespread agricultural clearing in the 18th and 19th centuries removed most original forest cover. The forests we see today largely regenerated during the past century and a half as farms were abandoned and land returned to trees.



These recovering forests have accomplished remarkable things. They now cover roughly three-quarters of Vermont, providing clean water, wildlife habitat, carbon storage, recreation, and the material foundation for rural economies. By many measures, they are strong and resilient, if vulnerable.

But they are also still developing.

Many stands are even-aged and structurally simplified compared to older forest conditions. Some struggle to regenerate desired species under pressure from browsing or non-indigenous plants. Climate change is altering disturbance patterns faster than forests have historically experienced.

If forests are verbs, then stewardship becomes less about holding conditions and more about guiding trajectories. This idea can feel counterintuitive.

We often equate caring for something with leaving it untouched. In some places, that is appropriate. Old forests, in particular, offer invaluable examples of ecological complexity that emerge through long periods of relative stability. Allowing forests to grow old is an essential part of landscape stewardship.

But the existence of old forests does not negate the role of active stewardship elsewhere.



On the contrary, a diverse landscape requires a diversity of conditions — young forests, mature forests, old forests — each contributing different ecological functions.

The challenge is not choosing between action and restraint, but learning when and where each is appropriate.

Thinking of forests as verbs also reshapes how we understand our own place within them.

Human beings are not external to forest systems. For thousands of years, people have influenced forests through harvesting, burning, cultivation, and protection. Indigenous communities shaped landscapes long before European settlement. Later generations cleared land extensively, then unintentionally created conditions for widespread forest recovery.

Today, our influence continues — through climate change, land use decisions, markets, and conservation choices. Whether we intend to or not, we participate in the ongoing process of forests being forests.

The question is not whether humans affect forests, but how consciously and responsibly we do so.

When debates about forests become polarized, they often reflect competing visions of what forests are. One vision sees forests primarily as places best protected from human influence. Another sees them as renewable working landscapes that sustain human communities alongside ecological systems.

Both perspectives arise from genuine care. Both capture partial truths. And both can coexist more productively when we recognize that forests are processes unfolding across time rather than static endpoints to be preserved or exploited.



Seeing forests as verbs invites humility. It reminds us that stewardship is provisional, adaptive, and ongoing. No single generation finishes the work. Each inherits conditions shaped by previous decisions and passes forward new possibilities.

Forests do not ask for perfection. They respond to patterns of care sustained over time.

When we see forests not merely as places we protect or resources we use, but as living processes in which we participate, our conversations about conservation can become less rigid and more grounded in ecological reality.

Forests are not waiting for us to decide what they should become. They are already becoming.

The question is whether
we are paying enough
attention to understand
how to live with them
well.

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