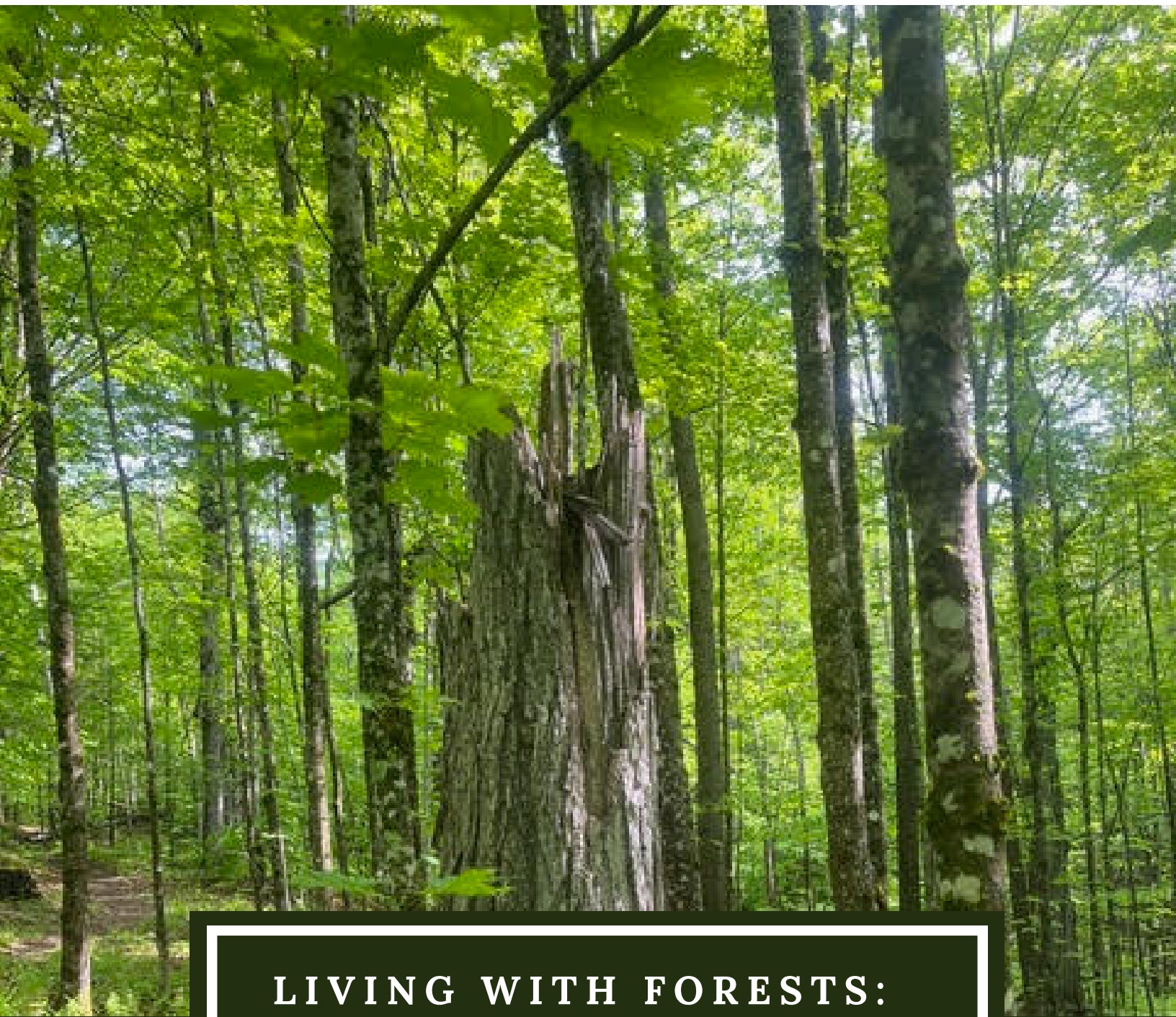




LIVING WITH FORESTS: ESSAYS ON STEWARDSHIP

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 2:

The Culture of Forestry

Why the Future of Our Forests Depends on Something Harder to See

Forests are often discussed in ecological terms like acres conserved, carbon stored, or species protected. Increasingly, they are discussed in economic terms as well — markets, workforce shortages, mill closures, and the financial realities of owning forestland, for example.

Both kinds of conversations are necessary. But neither fully explains what may be the most consequential change underway in our forests today: the gradual erosion of a culture of forestry. For generations, forestry in the northeast was not simply a profession or an industry. It was part of a broader rural identity — a shared understanding that forests were places people lived with, worked in, depended upon, and cared for over time. Stewardship was not always articulated in formal language, but it was practiced in daily decisions: when to cut, when to wait, how to leave something better for those who came next.

Not long ago, forestry was simply part of everyday life in many communities. Logging trucks passing through town drew little notice. A timber harvest on a neighboring property might prompt conversation about species, weather, or markets rather than controversy. People did not always agree about how forests should be managed, but the work itself was familiar. It was understood as part of living in a heavily forested place. That familiarity, more than consensus, formed the cultural foundation of stewardship. That is, a largely unspoken shared understanding of responsibility. Maybe even a sense of reciprocity.

**Today,
that familiarity is fading.**





Many in the Northeast still love forests deeply. In fact, public affection for forests may be stronger than ever. Yet fewer people grow up connected to the rhythms of land-based work. Logging operations are less visible. Mills have closed or consolidated. Fewer families derive livelihoods directly from forests. The practical knowledge once absorbed through proximity now often must be learned intentionally, if it is learned at all. And as that cultural connection weakens, forestry itself can begin to feel foreign.

Practices once understood as stewardship may be perceived instead as intrusion. Harvesting trees — long recognized as one tool among many for sustaining forest health and quality — can appear incompatible with conservation values when separated from the cultural context that once made it obvious.

This shift helps explain why debates about forests have grown more polarized even as shared concern for forests has increased. The disagreement is not primarily about science. It is about relationship.

When people no longer see themselves as participants in a working landscape, the idea of active stewardship can feel unnecessary or even suspect. Forests become places to admire rather than systems to live within. Protection becomes equated with a minimum of human influence, even in landscapes shaped for centuries by human decisions.

Meanwhile, those who continue to work in the woods — landowners, loggers, foresters — can feel increasingly misunderstood.

Their knowledge, built through experience and adaptation, may struggle to find recognition within conversations framed primarily by distance rather than familiarity.

The result is not conflict between people who care and people who do not. Nearly everyone involved cares deeply about forests. The divide lies between different cultural relationships to forests.

This matters because ecological sustainability and economic sustainability cannot endure without cultural sustainability.

Forests remain forests in the northeast largely because generations of people chose to keep them that way — often at personal cost or with modest financial return. A viable forest economy helps make those choices possible. Sound ecological science helps guide them. But culture — shared norms, pride, identity, and understanding — makes them durable.



Without that cultural foundation, policies become harder to implement, markets harder to sustain, and stewardship harder to transmit across generations.

We are beginning to see the consequences. Forest owners age without clear successors. Workforce shortages grow. Public debates become more adversarial. Simplified narratives replace lived experience. The signal-to-noise ratio declines just as decisions grow more consequential.

Yet this story need not end in loss.

There are signs of renewal. Younger landowners seeking connection to place. Partnerships that bridge conservation and forestry. Expanding interest in climate-smart wood products. Burgeoning and diversifying popularity of outdoor recreation. Programs that reconnect people with how forests function and what they provide.

Rebuilding a culture of forestry will not mean returning to the past. The social and economic conditions that shaped earlier rural life cannot simply be recreated. Nor should they. Because cultures evolve. New forms of stewardship identity can emerge — ones that integrate ecological science, modern values, and renewed understanding of human dependence on forests.

Doing so will require intention. It will require telling more complete stories about forests — stories that include both protection and stewardship, both restraint and active care. It will require making forestry visible again, not as extraction but as relationship. And, ultimately, rebuilding a culture of forestry will require recognizing that sustaining forests depends not only on what we know, but on who we believe ourselves to be in relation to the land.

Ecology tells us how forests function. Economy helps forests persist. Culture determines whether people choose to sustain them at all.

If we hope to keep forests healthy, intact, and resilient, rebuilding that cultural foundation may be the most important work ahead — even if it is the hardest to measure.

Forests grow slowly. Cultures change slowly too.

**The future of one may
depend on the renewal
of the other.**



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