

# WOOD AND FIBER SCIENCE

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## ENVIRONMENTAL OPTIMISM

The popular press has recently reported good environmental news. This is good news for us: for the profession of wood science. An article entitled "Here Comes The Sun," by Gregg Easterbrook, appeared in the April 10, 1995 *The New Yorker*. He feels the environmental laws, regulations, and private efforts over the last 25 years, supported by a heightened environmental consciousness, have resulted in "stunning" successes that deserve recognition. He states, "... America's air and water are getting cleaner, forests are expanding, and many other environmental indicators are on the upswing." Further in his upbeat article he says, "Even though Americans use more paper than they did a decade ago, this country is increasingly covered by a canopy of trees. It is commonly assumed that America is undergoing deforestation, but reforestation has been the trend for at least half a century."

Easterbrook, although not specifically mentioning wood scientists, does acknowledge that scientists and engineers have played an important role in these environmental successes. He believes that environmentalism has become a "core American political value" and that citizens do want to protect the environment.

We should recognize that we have participated in this movement. Our dedication to increasing our knowledge about wood has contributed to these environmental successes.

The April 1995 issue (Vol. 275, No. 4) of *The Atlantic Monthly* published an article entitled "An Explosion of Green," by Bill McKibben. While McKibben talked at length about the task facing environmentalists, especially in New England, he also recognizes

that there have been tremendous gains during the past 25 years or so. While not quite as upbeat as Easterbrook, McKibben makes many points that we, as wood scientists, have made: wood comes from trees that are a renewable resource; land can be reforested; there is a place for the commercial, industrial forest, and others. He discusses the usefulness of wood and clearly points out that North America was not covered by unbroken forest at the time Europeans arrived.

All of this from two leading popular magazines!

So what does this mean to us? To me, a couple of points have been made:

- 1) It does take a long time to change thinking, habits, and viewpoints—20 to 25 years.
- 2) Because of this, if we want to improve our "image" and the standing of our profession, and have citizens make informed decisions about the future of wood and wood products, we need to get the message "wood is wonderful and here's why" to young people.

SWST should take the leadership in establishing programs to educate people about our profession, and about the positive impact that wood scientists and wood technologists have had and will have on the environment. I suggest you read, again, Stephen Shaler's editorial "The Virtual Wood Scientist" (*Wood and Fiber Science*, Vol. 26, No. 4). I think we should develop a World Wide Web home page dedicated to wood science, and educational modules used in discussion groups on the Internet. It would be an opportunity to discuss all the uses of the forest and all the roles of wood in our society, as well as the future role of wood, and to correct misrepresentations about the

commercial use of the forest. The message would be directed at young people—high school and younger—who seem to spend a lot of time on the Internet. But whatever we do, it must catch and maintain their interest, and it must be accurate. SWST could lead in this effort.

Also, I encourage you to donate your time in elementary school classrooms. This is where we need to be if we want to get people interested in wood, wood products, and the issues impacting the use of the forest. During the last 25 years, Americans came to recognize that the environment needed protection and that message has finally become established. We should realize that we need to reach people when they are young and discuss with them the wonders of wood, a renewable resource. Young people are interested in the environment, and they will be in a position to act and influence policy and legislation in a few years.

Many teachers would welcome you. SWST could help those who would like to do this—especially those of us who don't teach for a living—by suggesting lesson plans and interesting demonstrations that would maintain the interest of young people. Take another look at Fran Kamke's editorial "Wood, What It Could Be" in the April 1995 issue of *Wood and Fiber*

*Science*. Let's tell grade school students about wood: what it is and what it could be. Let's tell them how "genetic engineering, intensive silviculture, thermal, chemical, and mechanical modifications" are helping provide us with ways to improve our environment and to better use a most remarkable renewable resource.

Jim Bowyer said in an editorial last year (*Wood and Fiber Science*, Vol. 26, No. 1) that, "we need to be in tune with the forces around us that are driving change." He concludes: "For our profession to remain the vital force that it is requires that we who are a part of it remain open to new ideas, be prepared to take risks, and anticipate change and actively apply our talents to help solve the societal problems that change will bring."

It seems now is the time to become more active: when the "popular press" reflects a general optimism about the environment, including the state of our forests. We need to effectively deliver our message about wood and its importance to all of us.

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