

“Nothingism” Has Wrecked the National Forests in California

By William Wade Keye

Things can go too far. What once seemed so right can, in time, prove to be wrong.

A classic example is America’s experiment with Prohibition. In 1919, puritanical do-gooders had their way. The sale of alcohol was banned by the 18th Amendment. Prohibition eventually led to unintended consequences. Organized crime and violence surged. The 21st Amendment rescinded it after 15 years, and the evil liquor still flows.

Consider a more recent, and similarly ill-fated, attempt to mandate purity. This one involves trees, forests, spotted owls, and ultimately, smoke and destruction. It began at the zenith of what were dubbed the Timber Wars, a bitter period of conflict between preservation and forest industry interests. The struggle was over the management of our vast system of national forests, lands heavily concentrated in the West and regionally blanketed with dense forests.

In 1996, the Sierra Club, a leading environmental organization based in San Francisco and founded a century earlier by the iconic John Muir, voted to approve a grassroots referendum that had great intuitive appeal. Since logging was bad, and there had been too much of it on our national forests, why not ban it completely? Just shut it down! This was the moral imperative of a green temperance movement. What better way to save the forest?

The policy, “Commercial Logging on Federal Lands”, still applies, and reads, “The Sierra Club supports protecting all federal publicly owned lands in the United States and advocates an end to all commercial logging on these lands” (Sierra Club 2022). The Club was not alone in its ideological cleansing. Other groups joined in fund raising, litigating, pressuring to make sure that nothing happened in the public’s woods. Earlier, more legitimate, concerns had focused on clearcutting and the liquidation of old-growth forests. Now puritanical fervor demanded more, or rather less. Public forest management became the target of zealously pressed Nothingism: no thinning, no selective tree cutting, no reduction of highly flammable woody fuels. Nothing that might lend itself to the production of a single board foot. Like with Prohibition, the ‘plug was in the jug’, and wouldn’t old John Muir be proud?

Now to the situation today. Northern Californians are all too familiar with smoke: summer after summer, week after gray, choking week. The Creek Fire, Dixie, Caldor, and many others. The foul brew pours off of our burning mountainsides. Follow it back to the legions of dead trees, degraded soils, ruined habitats, and trashed recreational opportunities. Smoke is the environmental left’s toxic crime wave, a floating, gloating Al Capone, curling across our lungs from the incineration of millions of once-vibrant

national forest acres. Of course, global warming and periodic drought are also culprits. But Public Enemy Number One is a systematic regime of forest neglect, imposed by do-gooders with the very best of intentions.

Let's look closely at the Sierra Club's "zero cut" policy. It says, in effect, that in order to protect our forests, we need to eliminate the profit motive (USDA 2022). Commercial logging can only destroy. It follows that all forms of economically viable timber harvest – not just clearcutting – are bad.

Nothingism, as exemplified by the Club's stance, has been in place now for the past quarter century. During this period, federal timber harvest has plummeted up to nearly 90% from historic levels (USDA 2022). As such, strict preservation should be working. Old forest habitat should be stable, if not increasing. Our seasonally dry public forestlands should be healthy and vibrant. Instead, they are disappearing. We are breathing them in as they go.

There was a time when the Sierra Club was not a threat to public forestry. Club members supported conservation and conceded the benefits of forest management in terms of rural economies, funds for trail construction, wood products and so forth. In fairness, late 20th Century forestry in the West squandered its social license. There was too much logging on our public lands. The profession was enamored with tree farming and slow to respond to the broader demands of a changing society.

Where we are now is a time of reckoning, and therefore new opportunity. Capitalism has a role to play in terms of efficiently allocating resources. The remnant forests that we have not yet destroyed need urgent restoration work if we are to keep them. The most heavily damaged lands no longer have trees. We need to bring them back to life. To do this work, forestry needs the Sierra Club, and the Sierra Club needs forestry. Our climate is warming. An entirely new vision is in order.

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