J. SCOTT CHRISTIANSON

Christianson dispels myths about timber production

Many myths and mistruths have been spread about timber production in the Pacific Northwest — spread by people such as the other environmental columnist with whom I share this page. The following excerpts from literature of the Association of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics dispels some of the common myths about timber production in the Pacific Northwest.

Myth one: Forest set-asides for the spotted owl are the primary reason for job loss in the timber industry.

Private timber companies in the Pacific Northwest export between 3 billion and 4 billion board feet of raw logs annually. One out of every four trees cut in the region is exported unfinished overseas at a cost of 24,000 jobs per year for local mill workers and woodworkers.

Technology has helped create automated wood production processes at the expense of jobs. Timber employment fell 15 percent in Oregon since 1989 despite soaring logging levels. Mechanization has cost jobs in spite of available timber harvests.

Myth two: Timber cutting must be increased to meet the demands of consumers for wood and paper products.

The U.S. timber industry could increase the "supply" of wood products by 25 to 35 percent just by increasing saw log utilization to Japanese standards. On average, about half the saw timber milled in the United States is either wasted completely or used for low-value products, and in Japan the recovery rate is typically 90 to 95 percent.

This means that the United States uses three or more logs to produce the same amount of timber that Japan produces from two. This inefficiency also contributes to our export problem since Japanese mills can afford to pay more per log than U.S. mills.

One-third to two-thirds of the trees felled in the United States are turned into wood chips or pulp, not lumber. Americans consume 69 tons of paper and cardboard annually, throwing away 32 million newspapers each day. Fifty percent of U.S. paper production goes into creating packaging material — most of it unnecessary. In 1989, U.S. postal patrons received 12 billion catalogs. More than 200 percent more garbage is generated now than in 1960 because of increased packaging.

One- to two-thirds of American trees that are cut can easily be "replaced" by recycled pulp and chips sources and reduced through the elimination of wasteful pulp products. The United States does not have to destroy the last of its native forests to meet such inflated wood products "needs."

Myth three: Trees that are harvested are replaced by replanting or natural regeneration.

Trees naturally regenerate by seed or from roots, but large clear-cuts often must be planted with nursery seedlings. The resulting tree plantations usually contain only one or two species, often from the same genetic stock or from trees adapted to other locales.

Natural forests are well-adapted to local conditions, but tree farms lacking genetic variety cannot adjust to drought and changing conditions. Unlike plantations, natural forests provide habitat for birds and other pest predators that help control insect and disease outbreaks, making them less vulnerable to forest health problems.

Myth four: Without professional forest management, old trees would die and decay anyway. Plantations are better for wildlife and counter the greenhouse effect.

About two-thirds of a tree's biological contribution comes while it is living, but the last third comes when it is dead. After death, a tree keeps the forest functioning by recycling nutrients, building soil structure, providing habitat for other creatures and creating water reservoirs. A large, decaying, fallen tree hosts twice as many living cells — including all organisms — as a live tree.

Ancient forests store several times more carbon in live trees, snags, downed logs and soil than managed forests and lumber. Although young forests take up carbon dioxide, they can't make up for the loss of stored carbon when native forests are liquidated. Converting old growth to young trees farms adds carbon dioxide to the atmosphere.

Myth five: Environmentalists and timber workers have nothing in common.

Unlike large, cut-and-run corporations that have no allegiance to the community, timber workers and environmentalists both have a sense of stewardship and commitment to place. Both are interested in sustaining production and jobs for the long term. Both are concerned with more than simply selling logs or increasing corporate profit margins — they value safety, health and quality of life. Both the environmental and labor movements care about long-term community stability and local people.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.