
Interview: Raymond Harbin

Radical ecologists seek 'population control through resource control'

Along with recent media scares about global warming, ozone depletion, and oil spills, there is a concerted attempt by radical environmentalists to stop all natural resource development, including the timber industry, especially on public lands.

One of the most influential environmentalist groups, the Wilderness Society, recently issued a report, "Mountain Treasures At Risk," seeking to stop the timber harvest in the Southern Appalachians. When the Wilderness report received prominent and uncritically favorable media coverage, Raymond Harbin, a forest ecologist and lumber company executive from Union City, Georgia, sought to reply. Unable to get his rebuttal aired in the liberal media, he eventually purchased a half-page ad in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

He was interviewed on Aug. 22 by our Atlanta correspondent, Andrew Rotstein.

EIR: What is your background in forestry and the lumber industry?

Harbin: Strangely enough, my formal education was in theology and ancient languages, and I taught classical political theory briefly, but I wound up in the hardwood lumber industry. I was involved for several years with a biomass gas generator, which involved a great deal of thermodynamics.

I'm now vice president and general manager of a 50-year-old hardwood specialty company. I also write and consult in this field.

But the thing I'm most proud of is that I've spent 30-plus years researching the ecology of the Eastern hardwood forests, from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada, and from the coast of North Carolina to as far west in Kansas as a tree will grow. I'm what we've begun to call a "wise-use conservationist," and an empirical forest ecologist. I'm currently working on a 600-page book, *The Eastern Hardwood Forest: A Consumer's Guide, Volume I*.

EIR: What prompted you to speak out about the Wilderness

Society's report, "Mountain Treasures At Risk"?

Harbin: Because no one else would. I thought the U.S. Forest Service would, and ultimately, I think they will. But they're affected by all kinds of political considerations that don't hamper me.

EIR: What is the goal of the Wilderness Society in issuing this report?

Harbin: What they ultimately want to do is to stop commerce.

To do this, they are trying to undermine the multiple-use concept, under which Congress mandates that public lands be managed to accommodate recreational activities like fishing, hunting, camping, boating, as well as timber harvest, controlled in a way to guarantee replenishment and the well-being of the whole natural system.

They want to expand the area of legally defined wilderness, where no development can take place in perpetuity.

They are out to equate timbering with "ecological disaster," and to conjure up wild images of the mindless, unsustainable rape of our forest resources.

They also suggest that Appalachian timber reserves are "insignificant," to use their exact word—which is absolutely false. Needless to say, if we don't need the resources here, then we don't need the people who earn their livelihood from this industry.

EIR: What is the definition of wilderness under law?

Harbin: The modern concept was created by Congress in 1964, designating a certain number of acres at least three miles from an existing road, but has been modified to the point where there are now some 90 million acres of public land defined as wilderness and therefore closed forever to resource development.

Now, I think we want a measure of wilderness. In the early 1960s, I wrote letters to congressmen in support of it. But I jumped off the bandwagon when I saw the tail wagging the dog.

EIR: What are the fallacies in their evidence or line of argument?

Harbin: Almost too many to enumerate.

Take recreation. It's undisputed that 98% of all recreational activities on Forest Service lands takes place within three-quarters of a mile of a road. You really can't get anywhere else, and if you can, what will you do when you get there? If you don't have reasonable access by vehicles, you discriminate against the very young, against the old, against the handicapped, those who can't walk long distances, against families in general.

They also imply that we're exhausting our timber supply. Absolute nonsense. Current law already safeguards the total national supply of this renewable resource. The fact is, the U.S. is now growing substantially *more* timber per year than we consume. The problem is, *we can't get at it.*

Basically, they try to equate true conservation, or wise-use conservation—which means hands-on management—with pure preservation—hands-off management, or really, no management at all. The concept of no management at all is really an awful one. If you really care about the forest, if you care about people and wildlife, if you're concerned with and love natural systems, then unbridled preservation is antithetical to everything you want.

The radical environmentalist literature I've seen, like "Mountain Treasures At Risk," is a semantic minefield. These reports are written from the library. The closest the authors have ever been to a natural system is the tree they see out the window.

EIR: Where does "pure preservation" lead?

Harbin: The catastrophe in Yellowstone National Park last year is a prime example. We wise-use conservationists have been advocating for years steps to avoid the uncontrollable fires that struck in 1988. We've been saying, you have to go in and pre-burn certain specific areas to take away the potential fuel from the huge conflagration that's bound to occur sometime, as it did.

Well, they didn't buy it. Their computers insisted that only 40,000 acres maximum could burn at any given time. When I was out there, in late July, the latest revised estimate was 1.6 million acres destroyed, including Yellowstone plus adjacent systems.

Or take wildlife. In the early 1960s, before wilderness designation by Congress, a very good group was founded to reclaim and preserve the big-horned sheep in Nevada and California, for scientific study, for hunting, for other purposes. They set up a system near the Joshua Tree National Monument, and established what they called guzzlers, to provide the sheep and the plants they depend on with water. They did a great job. They saved and revived the species.

After wilderness designation, all the sheep died. Why? Because you couldn't take a vehicle in there to maintain the guzzlers!

Another example: These people object to timber clearcuts. They say they're ugly. Well, so is an appendectomy. But if you have planned, well-distributed clearcuts, where you clear away everything, including growth of no commercial value itself, the forest will grow back properly, since the oaks are shade-intolerant, and won't replenish any other way. This restoration is critical for the black bear, which depends on prior consumption of acorns for sustenance during its annual period of semi-hibernation.

EIR: What's at stake for the economy in this dispute?

Harbin: That depends on where you want to cut off the multiplier effect of this industry.

But even on the narrowest level, in the Southern Appalachians alone, within 150 miles of the area under attack by the Wilderness Society, more than 50% of all American-made furniture is produced. The local availability of hardwood timber is a major factor for these plants' location and economical operation here.

The Eastern United States holds 100% of the world's supply of commercial red oak and yellow poplar. Within 375 miles of Blairsville, Georgia, 70% of the entire world's supply of white oak timber is standing, waiting to help reduce this country's trade deficit. For just 1988, the U.S. Commerce Department tabulated over 1.6 billion board feet of hardwood lumber exported. In addition, 10 cents per acre plus 25% of timber sale revenues "off the top" are paid in lieu of taxes to the local county, and these are areas with very little other tax base.

The economic impact is even greater in the Pacific Northwest, mainly because the area in question and the yield per acre are both greater than the Southeast, although it is almost all softwood there. I'm less familiar with that region, but I have confidence in the figure used by the American Forest Resources Alliance that the current controversy over the Northern Spotted Owl could cost 50,000 jobs, if not resolved properly.

EIR: Do you believe there's some other agenda behind the distortions of the environmentalists?

Harbin: For the radical leadership, most definitely. They want to control population through resource control. That's my personal opinion. They don't openly proclaim it, but this is what I've concluded, based on what I've seen. It's a kind of neo-fascism: Control people by controlling their economy, and you control their economy by controlling their resources.

Their agenda for the tropics, and for other Third World nations, is not basically different from their domestic agenda.

Most of the rank-and-file of these groups, and I've talked to many of them, are just deluded. They're people who are understandably concerned about the environment, they have this concern based on the sense that we're all part of natural creation and reliant on the Earth's resources, and so forth, but they're misled and frankly just plain brainwashed by the

radical leadership. The leadership is very adept at playing to the concerns of the uninformed members on an emotional level, and that keeps the funds flowing in to these national organizations. They don't deal with facts; facts are their enemy! Instead, they deal in perceptions, easily conveyed perceptions at that, and I'll be the first to admit, they're very good at it.

For example, they compare tropical forest devastation with modern North American silvicultural practices. It's just absurd, the two are light-years apart, both as to concept and as to effect, but their appeals are aimed at the unwary.

EIR: We have reported terrorist acts against the timber industry by a group called "Earth First," whose founder, David Foreman, was formerly chief Washington lobbyist for the Wilderness Society. Are you encountering this kind of thing?

Harbin: In addition to reading about it in your publication, I've heard reports about equipment vandalism and sabotage, including in western North Carolina recently. The blame hasn't been fixed in any of this, but some people suspect Earth First-type activists.

Frankly, I have trouble distinguishing between terrorists in fatigues and terrorists in pin-stripe suits. If one's livelihood is gone, whether it's through the efforts of a covert knife-wielding misfit, or a well-attired, erudite political activist, the effect is the same: you've got no future. And jobs are at stake. Not only timber and lumber jobs, but carpenters, woodworkers, builders, developers.

And more than just jobs. Think about the consumers of these products. Think about all we hear about the homeless and the underhoused, in America and in other nations.

How far back would these forces push us?

EIR: What efforts are being made, and what should be made, by the industry to influence legislation and public opinion?

Harbin: There's the National Forest Products Association, an old group, and the American Forest Resources Alliance, which has just come together in response to some of the more recent attacks. AFRA had an organizational meeting recently, there were hundreds of companies represented, some of them quite large. They raised in pledges just under \$6 million to inform and educate the public.

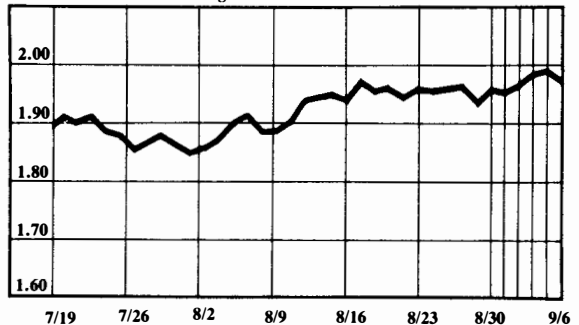
But the Wilderness Society itself has an *annual* budget over \$10 million, and that's just one of a whole host of groups we're up against. The top ten so-called "environmentalist" groups—and I object to that term being applied to these people, but I'll use it, under protest—the top 10 groups alone have an annual budget of \$160 million!

They have a 15-year jump on us in getting out their story, and awesome media influence. Our side has a lot of catching up to do. We may get a boost from public opinion when the average American sees the cost of building materials skyrocket, or when he gets upset that he can't afford to buy decent furniture anymore.

Currency Rates

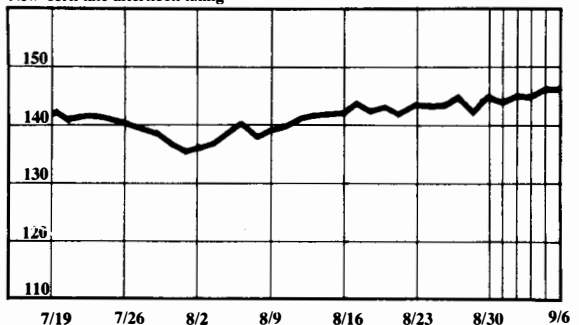
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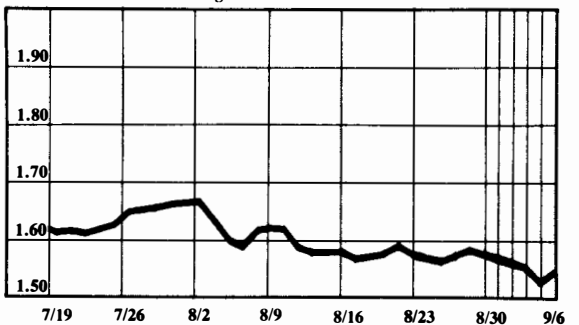
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