

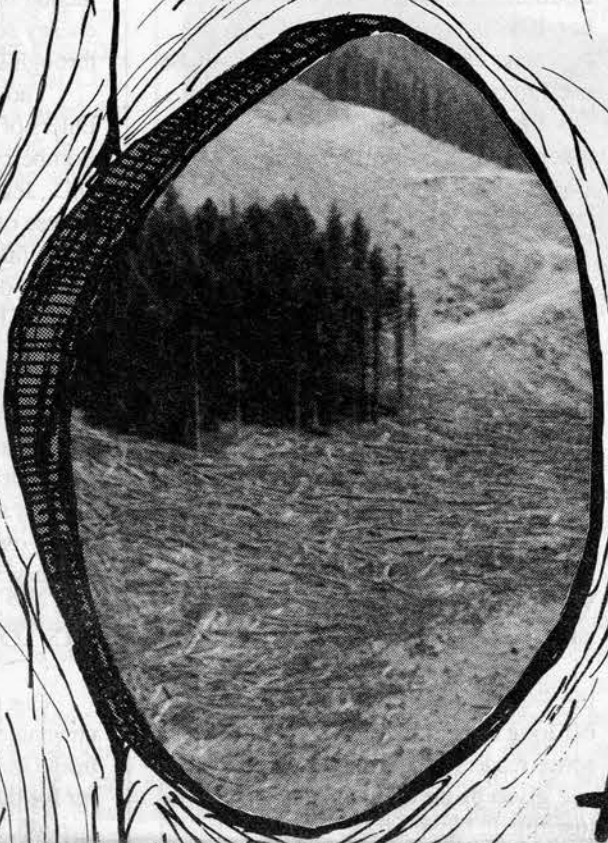
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HOW A MONTANA REPORTER WROTE WHAT HE SAW... AND LOST HIS JOB

by Richard Manning

My center of gravity in the world's circle of deforestation is a series of newspaper stories I wrote during the spring of 1988. I think of this center as a peephole in a board fence: the closer my eye approaches it, the wider becomes the view of what lies beyond. I was a confident reporter when I first put my eye to the hole, confident I knew where this looking would lead. In the end the field widened far beyond my expectations.

It shattered a career and settled a life.

The story came to me during the first months of 1988. I took a new assignment as the environmental reporter for the *Missoulian*, which is the daily paper based in Missoula. One of the three largest papers in the state, it covers all of northwestern Montana, an area the size of West Virginia. I had been with the paper almost three years, reporting until then on state politics and county government. It was my fifth paper in 14 years as a reporter. I had moved to Montana from Idaho in 1985, largely for a chance to live among the state's mountain streams and roadless backcountry. A few years later, when the chance came to switch beats to write about such places, I took it.

Steve Woodruff, the previous environmental reporter, put me onto the project that triggers all of this. Years before, he had done some interviews but had been unable to turn the story. He gave me a computer printout of one interview and steered me toward one of his anonymous sources.

This source was a bureaucrat and a forester, a person schooled to cut trees. This particular forester presided over the logging of a large corner of Montana, but in doing so, he came to understand that errors were made.

He had allowed his love of the land to open his head to science's growing wisdom about forests. This wisdom suggests that some of his colleagues have harmed the land.

I met him for lunch once, just to become acquainted, but did not ask him then about abusive logging on corporate property. Just two corporations — Plum Creek Timber Company and Champion International — own and log on about 1.7 million acres scattered across western Montana. Largely, this land exists as 2,600 separate square-mile sections; taken together, it is an area larger than Delaware.

It was common knowledge that the corporations had logged hard in recent years, but no one outside of the corporations knew how hard.

Encouraged by Woodruff, I followed up on that luncheon with a meeting in the source's office. Without much prodding, he laid out the logical framework that pointed to a clear conclusion: The logging business in Montana had taken a brutal turn that would punish the land, the local economy, and the small-time loggers and mills.

The jaws of a vise

This was not a case of corporate predation as usual. Instead, some unintended spin-offs of environmental law, a national business climate characterized by hostile corporate takeovers, and some land ownership patterns laid down more

than a century ago were forming the jaws of a vise.

It hinged on open abandonment of "sustained yield." This is an article of faith that has informed forestry since Gifford Pinchot, the first head of the Forest Service, brought the science to this country from Europe near the turn of the century.

The doctrine is simple: it says that one does not cut timber faster than natural growth replaces it. If it takes 60 years to grow a tree, then a corporation should cut about one-sixtieth of its trees each year.

The problem in Montana also hinged on what is known as the "checkerboard," the apt description of an ownership pattern that gives private timber companies alternate square-mile sections of land.

Since the government ceded alternate sections, color-coded maps of western Montana look like a checkerboard. In the Lolo Creek drainage, the squares are the green of the Forest Service, orange for Champion, and lavender for the sections held by Plum Creek. They are virtually the only players in the 15-by-25-mile swath of land drained by the creek, bounded on the west by the Idaho state line and on the east by the town of Lolo, which is just about 10 miles south of Missoula. The Forest Service owns about half that land, while Champion holds 40 percent and Plum Creek the other 10 percent. It is a drainage typical of the hundreds that finger out from western Montana's major river valleys.

Champion and its predecessor, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, had controlled those lands more or less for a century but had never logged them hard.

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A Montana reporter investigates logging on private land ...

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Then, in the late 1970s, change came.

Champion, a timber giant with land and mills spread throughout the world, was pressed for capital to build mills in Michigan and Texas. Lumber prices were depressed. Buying logs from federal lands to supplement the supply from Champion's own lands, a long-standard practice, would eat into the profit margin. So would the use of environmentally sound but costlier logging methods. All this pushed toward a decision in Stamford, Conn., Champion's corporate headquarters, a decision that began to show on Montana's land in the late 1970s.

Quietly the company decided it would no longer log its own lands only as fast as the lands could grow new trees. Instead, the company decided to log all of its lands as rapidly and cheaply as possible.

federal land in the upper reaches of Lolo Creek. His action was a frank admission that serious damage had been done.

No longer thick with trees, those steep, stony slopes that fatigued Lewis' and Clark's horses were beginning to slip away. The stone is granite, which makes a solid rock but a notoriously ephemeral soil, friable, grainy, and mobile before spring's rush of melt and rain. Logging on these rocky soils yields erosion.

Studies showed that sediment from logging roads and skid trails was significantly harming trout populations in Lolo Creek. Further, Champion and Plum Creek had cut so many trees that the drainage's elk herd had no place to hide from hunters or from the even more threatening attentions of a mountain winter's winds.

ly because virtually identical circumstances exist throughout the western end of the state. By 1991, that prediction appeared correct as the Forest Service began laying the legal groundwork for a much larger web of moratoria.

All of this was only hypothesis in the spring of 1988. As far as the general public knew, both Champion and Plum Creek were still practicing sustained-yield forestry. The mills were churning out lumber at record rates and a steady supply of logs would roll on forever, we were told.

Get the cut out

In its inner circles, however, Champion acknowledged it had abandoned sustained yield in favor of what came to be known as the "accelerated harvest."

But even on the inside, company officials said it would take at least 30 years to exhaust the supply of corporate logs. Because the program didn't begin until the late 1970s, the shortages shouldn't emerge until a decade into the next century. In reality, the situation was far tighter, and Champion knew it.

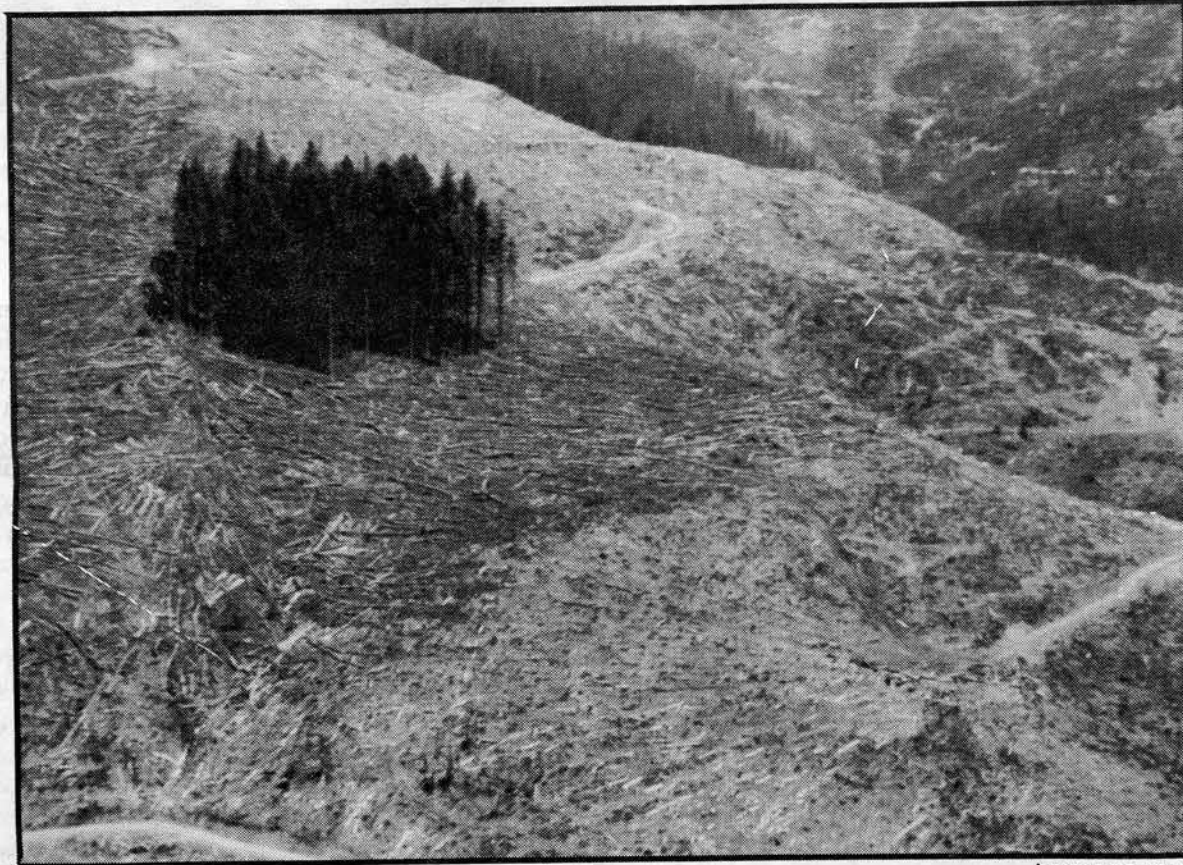
That was the fact I needed to prove and print, the heart of the story.

My first task was to locate harvest statistics independent of the two corporations. I had covered county courthouses long enough to understand that companies share a great deal of information with tax assessors, information that is public record. I asked some questions. As it turned out, a state tax official named Randy Pearson was building a study of taxation of forest lands and in the process had gathered data on Champion's inventory for every county in the state.

Pearson eventually learned that the average timber company pays total taxes of about 56 cents an acre on its lands. Champion pays less on a couple of square miles of trees than one of its workers pays on his three-bedroom home. Because corporation property taxes in Montana are based on inventory, it is in the company's best interest to report the cutting of trees. Once land has been logged, taxes drop.

Pearson's data was still raw, but he agreed to assemble some of it for me on his own time. It took most of an afternoon to enter the county-by-county data, but only a second or so for my Macintosh to spit forth a shocking figure.

Champion's property-tax records showed it had already logged all but 1 percent of its merchantable trees. The numbers offered only two possibilities: either the company was fudging its inventory to cheat on its taxes, or it had



Anonymous source

Clearcut surrounds a stand of trees

My source said Plum Creek, at about the same time, decided to do about the same thing, meaning both would soon run out of trees. Because the cut from corporate lands was supplying about half the logs in Montana, the situation raised the specter of timber shortages. Further, the rules of the checkerboard compounded the effects of those seemingly isolated corporate decisions.

Those rules gave the two timber corporations a substantial lever to use, first against smaller competitors, and ultimately to undermine national environmental laws designed to protect the forests and the creatures that depend on them.

Lolo Creek was the first place those rules came into play, a situation that in miniature both explains and presages a plague that spread throughout the Northwest.

The U.S. Forest Service is nothing if not an agency hell-bent on the cutting of trees. The agency is the prime habitat of the timber beast, and yet in 1987, Orville Daniels, supervisor of the Lolo National Forest, placed a moratorium on logging of all

Daniels' decision to "lock up" federal lands for a decade rested on a provision of the formal plan governing the forest. The plan obligates the federal government to compensate for environmental damage on adjacent private land by not logging federal lands. It is that plan that is the corporations' lever, the jaws of the vise.

While the two companies merrily buzz through the trees on their own lands, the feds have no choice but to respond as Daniels did. That dries up the supply of logs available to competitors. Once the supply of corporate logs is exhausted, however, Champion and Plum Creek will need federal logs to run their mills. These companies, unlike the smaller mills, have political bargaining chips to obtain them.

More than 8,000 people work in Montana's timber industry, a healthy chunk of employment in a state with a population of about 800,000. Historically, when the corporations have argued that they must have logs or close mills, they have gotten the logs.

Lolo Creek's moratorium was only the beginning. When Daniels imposed it, Forest Service officials quietly predicted that the moratorium would spread, most-

'MAYBE IF WE WOULD DO A BETTER JOB, THE ENVIRONMENTALISTS WOULD GET OFF OUR BACKS.'

—LOGGER KEVIN RAUSCH

How Richard Manning lost a job and found a calling



Gibbs Smith Books

Author Richard Manning

For Richard Manning, who quit his job at the *Missoulian* rather than accept transfer from his beat reporting on the environment, there was life after working for a daily newspaper.

But life wasn't necessarily easy, for he plunged into writing a book about his investigative reporting.

His major subject: two powerful out-of-state lumber corporations that controlled the biggest sawmills in Montana.

Manning calls his book, to be published this October, *Last Stand: Logging, Journalism and the Case for Humility*.

As excerpted here, the book exposes the degradation wrought by companies that turned trees into money at the expense of wildlife, streams, the land and what had been complex and diverse ecosystems. Manning uses internal corporate documents, on-the-ground observations, anonymous sources and aerial photos to document what Champion and Plum Creek corporations did to this land.

It was not a pretty sight, these stripped and eroded hillsides, and one result for a "jaded" newspaperman was his conversion to a belief in the primacy of ecology.

Last Stand is published by Gibbs Smith, Box 667, Layton, UT 84041 (801/544-9800).

— Betsy Marston

cut in less than a decade the lands it said would take 30 years to harvest. When I laid those alternatives out for Champion officials later, they were unequivocal; the inventory figures were correct. Their lands had been cut.

The figures I had gathered through the tax records, however, only applied to Champion and so only accounted for about half of the corporate lands in the state. Curiously, for reasons never revealed but presumably because taxes were low to begin with, Plum Creek was not nearly so aggressive in seeking tax reductions. The company had not report-

ed its cut for years and so left no independent paper trail. So far, I had only my source's word that Plum Creek was cutting its trees faster than they would grow back. That wasn't good enough to print.

"Bill Parson is a lying son of a bitch." That quote was delivered on the record by Tom France, staff attorney for the National Wildlife Federation and Montana's most active environmental lawyer. As such, he has no interest in

gratuitously inflaming the other side.

Bill Parson, Plum Creek's chief executive for the Northern Rockies, is nothing if not the other side. His manifestos defending his business are Reaganesque and blunt, battering rams with the bark still on them. In the environmental community, the majority holds with France that at least some of Parson's homilies do not cleave wholly to the truth.

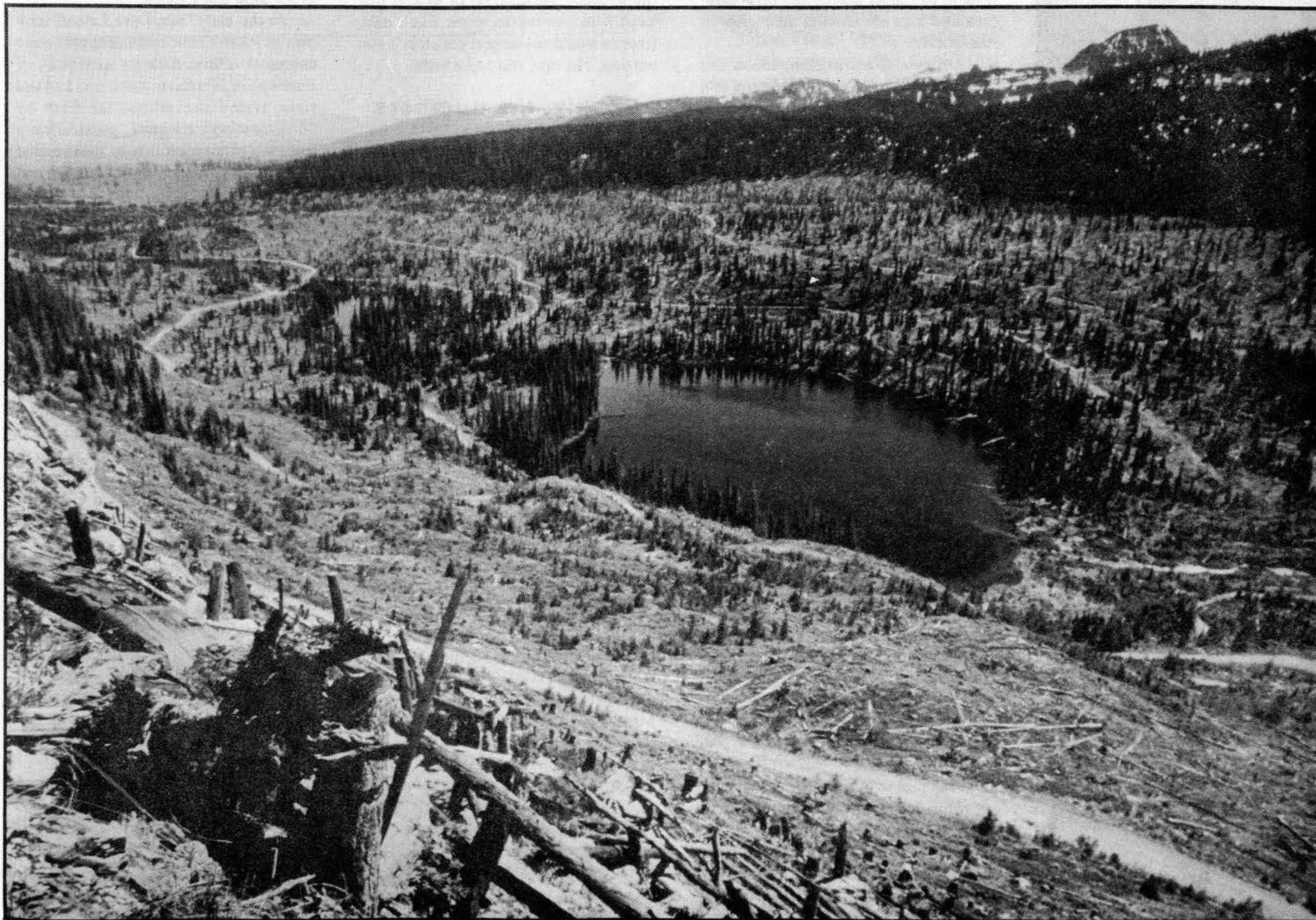
One incident is legend. On a tour of Plum Creek land, Parson once stood before a group of reporters and environmentalists in a clearcut to deny that the company ever logged the banks of

streams. He was standing in front of a logged stream.

When one hopping-mad environmentalist pointed this out, Parson continued to deny the practice by saying the stream wasn't technically and in the strictest sense a stream. My head, however, stores another image of Parson.

I met him for the first time when *Missoulian* photographer Michael Gallacher and I drove to Columbia Falls, a logging town on the west edge of Glacier National Park. I needed something quite simple from Parson: an admission that

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Mark O'Hern

Logged area around Jim Lakes

A reporter investigates ...

Continued from previous page

his company had stepped up its cut beyond sustained yield. I needed numbers from a fellow who had always been far more interested in images, in reciting the gospel according to timber.

What I got from Parson that day was several variations of the toilet-paper gambit. It is one of the favorites of the timber industry, the contention that its sole aim is to serve the public good by manufacturing products vital to American life, liberty, etc.

Toilet paper and the flag

The argument has become the timber industry's corollary to wrapping one's self in the flag. "Should the supply of forest products start to dry up or should the price go above what people are accustomed to paying, then ... the public is going to start to put pressure on the public land managers to make that timber resource available so that they can continue to enjoy those nice forest products. Toilet paper is a classic example," Parson told me.

Plum Creek, however, does not cut its trees to sell toilet paper. Plum Creek's trees make chip board, studs, and planks or, increasingly, the company's trees make nothing at all, at least not in this country.

This issue of log exports, Parson did not wish to discuss. When not sacrificing its trees in service of our backsides, the industry claims it acts only to preserve the jobs of millworkers.

Never mind that automation has trimmed more than 20 percent of the timber jobs in Montana in the past decade. The contention of benevolence toward millworkers, however, flies flat against the reality that record numbers of unmilled logs are leaving the region for the Orient.

Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana now send each year close to 4 billion board-feet of logs with the bark still on them to points east, mostly Japan and South Korea. Four billion board-feet is more than triple the total number of logs cut annually in Montana on all lands — state, federal, private and industrial.

One in five of all logs cut in the four states of the Northwest is exported raw.

With only minor exceptions, export of logs from federal and state lands is against the law. That means all of this trade comes from private lands. Plum Creek and Weyerhaeuser, the two largest private timber holders in the Northwest, also lead in exports.

Plum Creek's response to this is to label it an issue not worth mentioning in Montana, because all of its export logs come from company land in Oregon and Washington. Montana logs are milled in Columbia Falls and other regional facilities. However, in a region with interwoven networks of trade, where log-starved mills from Oregon and Washington come to Montana seeking federal timber, state boundaries are meaningless abstractions.

What Parson deemed worthy of mention in the interview was a manifest failing of his firm that he wished to confess for the record.

The problem, he allowed, was one of public relations: "We haven't done a very good job as an industry ... in explaining the fact, in getting people to buy on with the fact that if they want these forest products at reasonable prices they are going to have to kill some trees."

In the world of Plum-Creek-speak

ing warmed to this theme, Parson brought it to bear on the key question of the interview: whether his company, like Champion, had abandoned sustained yield in the early 1980s in favor of the accelerated harvest.

He said, no, it hadn't, and although numbers were not right at hand, the company had cut roughly equal amounts of its own timber in each year through the past decade and a half. I asked him whether numbers could be at hand.

He promised to send them later and then allowed that while the problem may not be Plum Creek's, it well may be Champion's, and further was not a problem of the industry over-cutting its lands but rather a problem of the Forest Service undercutting public lands.

I asked him about allegations that his company had used shoddy and damaging practices.

"I don't think we've done anything wrong in that area. The prescriptions we have applied on the ground have been sound silvicultural prescriptions," he said.

End of interview, but Parson did not want me to leave. He wanted to make sure I saw the company nursery in a neighboring town, where its next generation of seedlings was being incubated. And he wanted me to see the company's PR videotape showing nappy workers, wildlife, and vigorous saplings arching to the sun. Gallacher and I sat through the tape in his conference room. Parson watched, too, then left me with a curious statement.

"It may not be the way we are," he said of the tape, "but it's the way we would like to be."

He expected that I would not write of things as they stood, but as Bill Parson would like them to be. He wanted me to accept the same set of images that kept him coming to work each day. Images would not support the story I was writing. The story still had a hole.

Finally, the numbers

A few weeks later I received a letter signed by Parson himself. It contained the numbers I had asked for, that he had promised but that nothing other than his word compelled him to give me.

Between 1981 and 1982, Plum Creek had doubled its harvest. By 1987, it had tripled the harvest rate of the 1970s, a level it continues.

Those numbers flatly contradicted what Parson had said in the interview. My story was back in business. For at least six years and to the present, Plum Creek had forsaken sustained yield to cut the hell out of its trees. I have no idea why Parson decided to confirm this.

For more than a century, 1.4 million acres of Northwest forest basked relatively unmolested, the beneficiary of Plum Creek's obscurity within the network of businesses commanded by the Burlington Northern Railroad. Those lands were the dowry awarded the railroads in the marriage of Midwest to Northwest, a carrot extended by President Lincoln in 1864.

In return for accepting the risks of building railroads, the government ceded the railroads vast tracts of federal lands. Corporate predecessors and then Burlington Northern itself used the land for a few railroad ties, some corporate retreats here and there, lodges to entice passengers, but the business at hand was railroading.

Ignored, the trees grew, became tim-



voir even Burlington Northern could not ignore in those heady days of the 1980s, when Reaganomics began to bloom full force and America was in business again. It was the day of the MBAs, economic Darwinists, nut-cutters. This mindset fostered, from the forests' point of view, a fatal abstraction: Trees became inventory; worse, slow-growing inventory susceptible to fire and bugs.

Said Parson of the stretch of the natural world in his charge: "If you had that kind of investment in your portfolio, you'd get rid of it and get something that was growing."

Foresters get the ax

More particularly, though, Plum Creek officials now acknowledge that a form of predation in the corporate habitat was largely responsible for accelerated harvest. The '80s was an era of takeovers. Firms with undervalued assets like old-growth timber were particularly vulnerable prey. The solution was to cut and sell the timber as rapidly as possible, convert the asset to cash, reinvest it and hold the asset strippers at bay. Plum Creek took that solution.

In the early '80s, Dave Leland took over as Plum Creek's president and chief executive officer. A sleepy subsidiary of Burlington Northern woke up. Leland straightway streamlined the firm by "downsizing" its staff, particularly foresters whose job it is to ensure that logging operations are silviculturally and environmentally sound.

At the same time it doubled its cut. Parson acknowledges that 35 foresters in his employ got the ax.

One of my sources, a Plum Creek forester, said the company's attitude shifted dramatically. Foresters who protested the heavy-handed practices were given a clear choice: "They would tell you either to do the job or someone else will," this source said. "The joke was you would come in from the field and your desk would be gone, but it wasn't a joke, it happened ... I think the way the company looked at it was they saw all these trees, all this standing old-growth timber, as money in the bank."

In 1989, Burlington Northern pulled off a couple of neat corporate splits that eventually landed Plum Creek clear of its parent company as a limited partnership, culminating a series of moves that company officials acknowledge left shareholders "several billion dollars" richer. By 1990, Plum Creek was openly referred to as "the Darth Vader of the industry."

In 1990, two years after Bill Parson ducked my questions about sustained yield, the company admitted cutting its trees twice as fast as they would grow back.

Parson told a Montana state legislator, "We have never said we were on a sustained-yield program, and we have never been on a sustained-yield program."

**'SURE,
(CORPORATE
LAND) IS
EXTENSIVELY
LOGGED, BUT
WHAT IS
WRONG WITH
THAT?'**

**— BILL PARSON
PLUM CREEK
TIMBER EXECUTIVE**

Let's get to the heart of it. Sure, it (corporate land) is extensively logged, but what is wrong with that?"

When Gallacher and I left Parson that day, he told us we really ought to visit the company's nursery in a small town about halfway between Missoula and Columbia Falls. There the company incubates the seedlings, rows of them, straight, uniform, and with genetics certified to warm an accountant's heart. This nursery, the company says, is an emblem of its good intentions. Gallacher and I had seen nurseries before. The story would not dispute the fact that both Champion and Plum Creek do plant trees. It's in their interest. There is a federal tax break for reforestation.

The real issue is whether those trees will grow, or, more complicated still, whether one can replace an entire natural community we call a forest by planting only trees. A simple tour of a nursery could reveal nothing about that issue. We declined Parson's invitation.

Instead, we chose to visit another piece of Plum Creek property, hard-cut timberlands in a place called Jim Lakes.

The lakes lie in alpine country, high country that rolls against the Mission Mountain Wilderness Area. The east slope of the Missions is fingered with a series of canyons that slide creeks down to either the Swan or Clearwater rivers below. At the head of each drainage runs the wilderness boundary, federally protected wilderness lands where machines, including simple ones like bicycles, are banned.

Against these boundaries lie sections of Plum Creek land, and so one can walk this strangely symbolic and still starkly real line where wilderness and civilization collide. Jim Lakes — there are two of them pooled at the center of a bowl of land ceded to Plum Creek — lie within sight of this line, or at least in sight now that the trees are gone. But it's

best to visit Jim Lakes by first going to Cold Lake, a mile-long bowl at the head of a parallel drainage, parallel in elevation, slope, climate, size, and, we can now only imagine, once parallel in vegetation. The difference is, Cold Lake is inside the wilderness boundary. You walk there up a middling steep swath of forest trail canopied by bearded old spruce, lodgepole, and subalpine fir.

At the lake there is a campsite, unused. It has been circled with a ring of twine and a small notice from the Forest Service asking hikers not to camp here for a year or so. The soils and plants of this alpine terrain are notoriously fragile. They will withstand not even an occasional crushing by a nylon tent, not even the thump of a hiking boot's sole. This kitchen-sized chunk of tender land needs a rest.

Gaping bulldozer bites

Just a mile or so away at Jim Lakes there is no rest.

When I was there the clearcuts were but a couple of years old, a rocky, mountain amphitheater stripped of all trees. These alpine lakes and streams are able to hold life only to the extent that a ring of trees can shield them from winter winds and intense mountain sun.

Because of this, forestry standards that Plum Creek itself has endorsed — and claims it enforces — forbid logging the edges of lakes and streams. The banks of Jim Lakes and the creek that veins them were bare. Near the outlet of one lake, we saw gaping bulldozer bites out of each side of the creek's bank, cleat marks where the cat clomped straight across the creek.

This is a violation of forestry standards. This cat cut stands just a few feet downstream from a bridge. Presumably, the cat's operator believed the wooden bridge would not suffer the weight of his machine, so the creek did.

Across fresh-built roads, fans of

eroding sand wash down slope, ultimately toward Jim Creek, a creek that used to raise young trout until the sand filled the space between the rocks where fish usually lay eggs.

None of this damage derives necessarily from the simple act of cutting trees. These scars on the land are rather the result of *how* one cuts trees.

There is a band of practices, ranging on its gentlest level to the snatching of an occasional tree from a dense stand and snaking it out with a horse, to the level of devastation around Jim Lakes.

This is forestry at its harshest — not really forestry at all, but more a form of strip mining.

At its most severe, this sort of cutting proceeds across very large clearcuts, hundreds of acres at a time stripped not only of mature, usable trees, but of all trees, all vegetation. The sawable is sawed, the marginal is burned, the limbs and brush are burned, the land is burned and then a few years later crews plug in genetically and economically acceptable saplings.

A forest is reduced to the mountain's equivalent of a Midwestern cornfield in a massive ecological and genetic experiment. A couple of hundred years from now, we will know if it worked. If it doesn't, we will know the corporations got the last of the wood out fast and cheap.

'Nazi forestry'

Arnold Bolle has a name for this. Bolle is a softspoken old man, dean emeritus of the University of Montana's School of Forestry. Likely he had a hand in the training of more foresters than any person in the West.

"It's Nazi forestry. You clear off all that old junk and put in a good tree of good genetic quality in orderly rows as if that's the whole reason God created trees, just for our benefit," he once told me. "It's a very comfortable thing to think that man is in total control and everything is obeying us."

Yet, in a legal sense, asserting that "man" is in control of Plum Creek's land overstates the case. In Montana, Plum Creek is in control, largely because Montana, unlike all other timber-producing states in the Northwest, has no law governing forestry practices on private lands.

Despite the fact that these practices affect wildlife, water quality, and irrigators well beyond the corporate boundaries, Plum Creek may do largely as it will on the land the federal government ceded to it. Not that people haven't tried to gain some control.

Repeatedly, Ben Cohen, a state representative who once worked for the Forest Service, has introduced bills to create a forest practices act, but it is a measure of the political clout of the industry that those attempts generally die in committee.

Part of the credit for this goes to the state's top forester, who publicly counsels legislators that the state doesn't need a forest practices act. Privately, he has offered a different opinion.

Technically, Gary Brown's job is to manage all state-owned timber lands, a job that gives him the title of state forester. When the state, however, began toying with the notion of a forest practices act, Brown became the official point of concentration for legislative investigations of activities on all forested lands.

His advice to the Legislature was that it should not pass a law mandating sound forest practices. Brown's preferred method was to jawbone the corporations into voluntary compliance with an industry-drawn list of prescriptions

"best management practices."

Not long after I spoke with Parson and saw his company's handiwork on the land, I interviewed Brown in his office to see what he thought ought to be done about shoddy forestry in the state. That, he told me, was "old news." I was only focusing on the negative, out to give the craft of forestry a bad name at the same time that the industry had cleaned up its act. He became visibly angry at one point.

"I guess I don't like the way this conversation is going," he said.

For the record, he felt all was well on the land and that the state shouldn't gum up the works with a new set of regulations. For the record, a reporter's guarantee of anonymity is not something to be taken lightly. I have never broken one, but then I have never been painted into a tough corner with one, the corner where a public official paid to do a job uses a reporter's shield to cover his ass, to make the reporter take the heat for the job the official is supposed to be doing. Besides, I made no guarantee of anonymity to Brown. Steve Woodruff, the reporter who handled this story before I was on it, made the deal.

In one of my boxes of notes there is a long computer printout Woodruff gave me after scrawling at its top in red ink: "BACKGROUND ONLY. NOT FOR PUBLICATION." Woodruff told me the notes are a transcript of an interview in which Brown and some members of his staff described practices similar to those I saw on Plum Creek lands.

In the interview, Brown speaks of the irreparable damage by bulldozers on steep slopes, of erosion and the subsequent loss of topsoil that makes the regrowth of the next generation of trees difficult if not impossible. Brown even tells a story that I heard subsequently from other sources: The state set up a committee to head off some of the problems in checkerboarded drainages. State, federal, and industrial managers would cooperatively schedule cuts in a given drainage to spread the shock, limit damages to water quality, and rotate the harvest fairly.

Industry, however, used the information to anticipate where the public entities were headed next and would beat the state and federal loggers to the punch.

Later in the interview, Brown begins to handle the hot issue, the need for a law setting forest practices.

... I hope we end up with a forest practices act, something that is realistic so that we can carry it out, because we don't have a mandate right now.

Partly because of Brown's subsequent public pronouncements, he does not have the mandate he longed for privately. Plum Creek and Champion still may behave as they wish on timbered lands in Montana.

Because I took no information from the man I am about to describe, he was really more a guide than a source. He knew the logging roads and clearcuts of the Seeley-Swan Valley. There, people work cutting trees, creating a web of clearcuts tiling the valley floor below.

These patches, some a mile square, are mostly the work of Plum Creek, which owns hundreds of sections of land in the 20-mile-wide swath between the Bob Marshall and Mission Mountain wilderness areas.

Continued on next page



Trygve Steen



© James R. Conner

Mixed ownership (Plum Creek, state, Flathead National Forest) logging in the Swan Valley and Mission Mountains (1988)

A reporter investigates ...

Continued from previous page

Logging's hard face

Logging carves a hard face on the land, on the people and the towns. Shops and cafes wear day-glow green signs announcing their sympathies for the timber industry. Environmentalists are called "tree-huggers" and "flower-sniffers." The local bank sends out pro-logging tracts with its monthly statements.

Environmentalists and industry tussle over the right to screen their respective video-taped propaganda to elementary school classes. Four-wheel-drive pickup trucks, hauling rows of chainsaws stabbed in racks like oily Excaliburs, nose into a string of taverns at quitting time.

Inside, men uniform in wide, red suspenders pursue their leisure with the earned abandon common to any workingman's bar, but the mood can blanch quickly. Eyes and voices harden when people speak of timber, which is why my guide wished to remain anonymous. He lived in this valley and drank in these bars, so I will call him only "the Savage." He was much like the cedar savages I knew as a kid.

He was an environmentalist, I guess, but an odd variety. In his thirties, wiry and full of a cackling chatter, he made his living catching what fell through the cracks, scavenging a bit of firewood here, some cedar shakes there, probably killing an occasional out-of-season deer. He knew in great detail how to shoot the locks off Forest Service gates that closed old logging roads. He was full of racist theories as to why corporations were clearcutting his valley. For this I thought him an idiot.

I thought further, though, when I learned that he once pushed a paraplegic friend across about 40 miles worth of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. The pair —

the crippled man in a handcart — covered about two miles a day of mountainous footpaths. This friend was ill, and the Savage believed one should not die without seeing the Bob.

But on the day I am remembering, the Savage was guiding Gallacher and me to some of the more egregious logging sites of the Seeley-Swan. It was the day we found Jim Lakes. Beyond the lakes, though, we saw more clearcuts fingered with erosion, stream beds stripped, lake shores trimmed bare of trees, and mile on mile of permanent roads bleeding their sediment into nearby trout streams. These are the marks of logging. We were driving those roads in my Jeep, but sometimes we'd walk, for a feel of the place. It was a hot day, and yet in some uncut places we walked beneath middle-aged spruce, cedar, and fir, stepping on the cool, spongy floor of a live forest.

Then the forest broke to a clearcut. The temperature jumped 20 degrees. The air lost its load of chill vapor and the ground rattled hard and dry beneath our boots.

We walked in one spot where a logger worked. We talked to him after he used a crane-like log loader and an aggressive dog to block the road that was our exit. He shouted at us over the pocka-pocka of his idling diesel. We told him what we were doing; he did not seem to appreciate our work. We read the bumper sticker on his truck announcing that his property was "insured by Smith and Wesson." He glared from the loader's seat and explained how environmentalists stood in the way of the huge machine's huge payments. Were we environmentalists?

We guessed we weren't. He moved his crane and dog to let us go.

A few hundred yards down the road, the Savage made us stop the truck so he could rail a bit. Plum Creek only wanted

a few of the species that were growing in that clearcut. The remaining trees, at least a quarter of them, the loggers had bulldozed into piles the size of houses. These logs they wouldn't saw, but burn.

The company believed firewood scavengers might be injured and file lawsuits, so forbade the collecting of firewood. This angered the Savage as he leaped around a pile of logs large enough to heat several houses for several winters in a valley where poor and rich alike heat with wood. He showed us dead buried trees a couple of feet in diameter and said they would have made decent cedar shakes.

Plum Creek was not interested in harvesting cedar. In that valley, it was not considered a "commercial" species. Plum Creek was more interested in stripping a forest of trees it considered undesirable so that it might plant species more usable in its mills. This is how Plum Creek farms trees. Throughout the industry, such a practice is considered sound silviculture. These are the rules of the land.

We were visiting Gold Creek's valley, where Champion now owns and has mostly cut at least 100 square miles of land. There is very little checkerboarding in Gold Creek. Instead, it lies under a mostly contiguous blanket of Champion's ownership. It feeds the mill at Bonner.

As we drove up that drainage, Gallacher and I became more and more excited, because it appeared we were going to find the photos that would document our story. My Jeep had traveled a full 15 miles up dusty logging roads, passing through devastated clearcuts the whole way. It was as if we had somehow left what we knew as Montana.

The valley that holds Gold Creek is but 10 air miles from Missoula, but it is

strategically screened from the major highway nearby. There is no reason to drive into the drainage other than to cut trees. We and most Montanans never visit places like this, a sort of loggers' hell.

On previous trips, we had seen mile on mile of hard-cut land, yet nothing like this, a once-forested mountain valley worked as hard as a strip mine. Champion had "slicked off" — the local term for a clearcut, one the loggers themselves use — its land in other areas of the state, but most of its land elsewhere is interspersed with federal, state, and private holdings. In this drainage, contiguous ownership makes the evidence of the corporation's work roll out to the horizon like a tidal wave of deforestation.

After a couple of hours, we heard a saw clatter from a distant ridge and headed toward it. A logger named Kevin Rausch was reworking a seed-tree cut, a common logging technique. On the first pass, loggers all but clearcut an area, leaving standing only a single mature Western larch on every half-acre or so. That produces a forest covered with trees about as thickly as goalposts cover a football field.

After those parent trees have shed a few years' worth of cones to seed the next generation, loggers cut them down, which Rausch was doing. He worked on a ridgetop commanding a view that summed the recent history of Gold Creek.

Stretching to the sky behind him were mile on mile of bald slopes webbed by steep gravel roads for logging trucks and fingered by the trails of the cats that had skidded the trees.

Before now, I had seen this spot only on computer. I had crunched through the state tax records which revealed that Champion had cut 95 percent of its trees. Yet I had no feel for that statistic until I saw it printed on the land by the mile. Officially, foresters from both Plum Creek and Champion had told me such scenes did not exist, that, yes, they were cutting, but they were using

techniques to ensure regrowth of the forests and to prevent erosion.

Yet erosion and tactics that cause erosion were everywhere. Topsoil was visibly in flight. True, the next generation of trees was being seeded, but how could it grow when the integrity of the soil was so undermined?

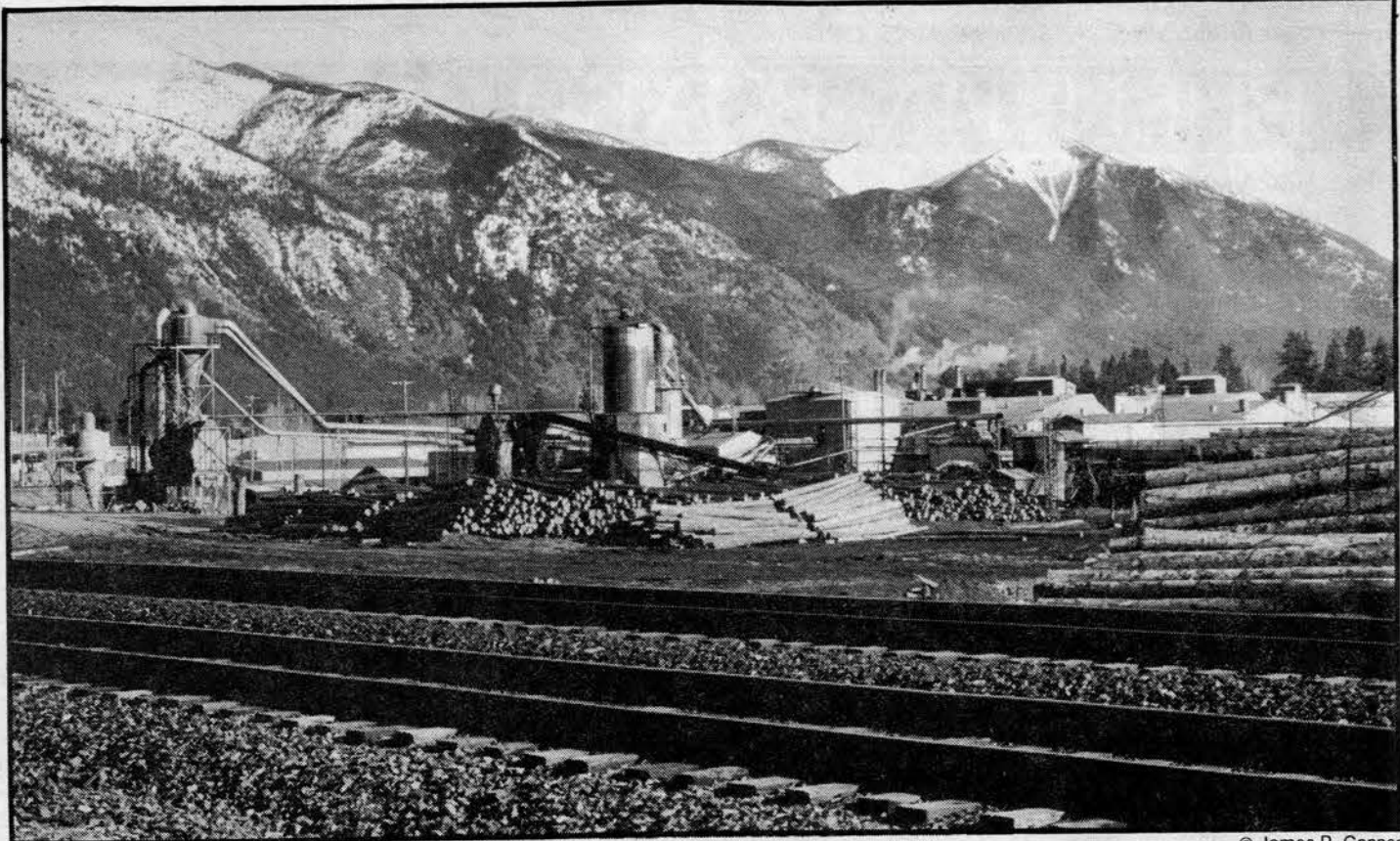
Throughout the story, we found the loggers to be frank and approachable, willing to speak, but often resigned to the paradox of their lives. They did not like what they were doing, but it was the work they knew, and the work that at once bound them to and split them from these mountains. Rausch felt the bind as he answered my questions. He glanced grimly over the sweep of clearcuts behind him, then said, "Maybe if we would do a better job, the environmentalists would get off our backs."

Rausch was telling us something important: This story was not so much about the cutting of trees as it was about the ways in which we cut trees. These days, our methods are all aimed at profit, or more precisely, profit in the next quarter as opposed to profit 20 years hence. In this taking of the forests for our own benefit, an act as old as humans, there are compromises to be made in the interest of ensuring a future. There are ways to cut that can ease the pain.

In Montana, it was not news that industry was cutting trees, but what was news was that quietly, over nearly a decade and out of public view, the industry had responded to tough times by giving no quarter. The industry existed to get the wood out and get it whacked into studs, plywood, and cardboard boxes as fast and as cheaply as possible.

We found the dozers that day simply by asking Rausch where they were. They wouldn't be skidding the trees he had cut for a few days, but Rausch said that over there, off toward the horizon, hidden in one of the draws that veined the drainage, we would find the cats. We thanked Rausch, climbed into the Jeep and bounced over more miles of logging roads, over ridges, around the switchbacks until we finally found the cats.

They were exactly as my sources told me they would be, working slopes almost too steep to climb on foot. If that same ridge were on public land, where rules govern forest practices, those cats would not have been there at all. Those slopes were far too steep for tractor skidding under federal guidelines. Instead, the Forest Service would have required a gentler aerial system of cables to snake logs upslope. Cats churn the topsoil and make it vulnerable to erosion, especially vulnerable here on slopes so precipitous.



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Plum Creek's sawmill and lumber yard in Columbia Falls, Montana

Yet cats are about half as expensive as any other method of skidding.

A torturing of the land

At the top of the ridge, the cats pivoted and pointed their blades straight down slope along already well-grooved trails. Immediately, they dropped their blades for a bite of soil, a method of slowing their descent.

As the cats neared piles of felled logs, the operators set the blades down hard to jam them to a full stop, scouring another bite of soil. The operator left the cat and pulled a cable called a choker from a series of such cables wound on a winch that looked like a big yo-yo on the rear of the cat.

The operator set the choker on a log, winched it to the cat, then clomped the choker onto the next log. He repeated the whole process until a half dozen or so logs were tethered to the crawler. Then the cat headed on down the hill, with the blade still biting, tracks pivoting and screeching, with the butts of logs rooting a deep furrow straight down the fall line.

Anywhere else, that furrow would be called a ditch, an instant watercourse inviting erosion.

Over the weeks we had been on the story, we had asked industry people repeatedly about just such practices, and they denied them, said that forestry was about enlightenment and stewardship and respect for the land. Yet we stood on the hillside that day and saw only a torturing of the land, soil sent downhill by the blade of a cat or churned and left naked and helpless before the force of

the first rushing thunderstorm.

Those trails scoured by the cats are repeated every 100 feet or so on almost any steep clearcut. At that rate, a section of land, a square mile, can accommodate more than 200 such trails, each a quarter mile long.

Champion International owns about 1,300 sections of land in western Montana. So does Plum Creek, and each plans to have cut all of it by the close of the century. The force of this multiplication can only sink in after you have stood in an old skid trail, as I once did, where rain and cats had eroded it four feet deep, laying bare a cross section, first of detritus, topsoil and organic decay, then of volcanic ash, then of glacial gravels. The wealth of the eons squandered in a few passes of the cat that wrings a few more pennies from an eight-foot two-by-four.

Each of these thousands of skid trails runs downhill, as does water, first to ephemeral streams and freshets, then to creeks, then to rivers like the Big Blackfoot. There what we knew as topsoil becomes silt, and fish die in the translation.

Silt gathers in the spaces between rocks where trout deposit eggs, smothering both the eggs and young trout. In a few years, once-vibrant trout streams become sterile ditches, broken by the work of carrying topsoil away. This river was the setting of Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, a novel of family, place, and flyfishing.

Now, trout fishermen bypass the Big Blackfoot because the fish are mostly gone.

On a bright morning in spring we flew low into the sun. Before this, we had learned of the clearcutting of Montana from what people had told us. We had seen it in the numbers tucked into computers and heard it hashed in the debate between conservationists and loggers. We had walked among the trees and the clearcuts. There was, though, still another perspective. Photographer Michael Gallacher and I flew that day to find that nothing could tell this story as starkly as the view from a Cessna 210.

From the air, Montana has come to resemble Forest Service maps that are color-coded to show land ownership. I was looking straight at the checkerboard, drawn not on a map, not an abstraction, but real on the land below. The ebb and flow, the contours, the winding of river valleys, the random roundness all lay violated.

Where Champion and Plum Creek owned land, they had cut trees, leaving straight boundaries visible from miles above. The straight edges of clearcuts slammed against wilderness, the roll of hills rammed into square holes. Montana's face had been cut up and sold.

Excerpts above are from *Last Stand: Logging, Journalism and The Case for Humility*, by Richard Manning, to be published in October by Gibbs Smith, Box 667, Layton, UT 84041.

Andrus visits a gentler logging site

BLANCHARD, Idaho — Four years ago Idaho Gov. Cecil Andrus visited Plum Creek Timber Co. land and blasted what he found there as one of the worst logging operations he'd ever seen. Spring Creek, he said, looked as if it had been used as a skid trail.

Last week, Andrus toured another Plum Creek operation and liked what he saw.

At one sale logged this year, Plum Creek had protected streambeds and left many trees standing.

"It's a decided difference from what the Forest Service used to call 'even-age management' and what the rest of us knew as clearcuts. It's a welcome change," Andrus said.

As he spoke during a news conference on a hilltop above Idaho Highway 41, Andrus wore a Plum Creek ball cap. The company, which owns 1 million-plus acres of timberland in Washington, Idaho and Montana, has been widely criticized by conservationists for its harvest methods. Andrus took credit for helping to change the company's logging practices.

"I would like to think that maybe, just maybe, I had a little bit of influence on the corporate structure," said the former secretary of the Interior.

Charles Grenier, vice president of Plum Creek's Rocky Mountain Region, said the company changed in the past two years because "we don't think the

public will accept clearcutting."

Clearcutting is still used on 20 percent of his region's operations, Grenier said.

Another 15 to 20 percent of the sales involve "new forestry," in which some valuable old trees are left standing in logged areas for wildlife habitat or for other values that are important to the public, Grenier said.

Company biologist Lorin Hicks compares the method to banking, because Plum Creek will return in 15 or 20 years and remove the trees that it saved the first time. By then, a new understory of small trees will be established.

But Liz Sedler, a Sandpoint conservationist, cautioned Andrus not to

form an opinion about Plum Creek based on one "showpiece."

"It's still a pretty big mess," she said.

University of Washington Professor Jerry Franklin, widely credited with developing new forestry, said Plum Creek has provided the chance to try environmentally promising techniques under a wide variety of terrain and stand conditions.

"It isn't so much we know this is the answer," said Franklin. "We're going to evolve the answer over time."

— Julie Titone

Julie Titone writes for the *Spokane Spokesman Review* in Washington.