

## Title: Forestry, Scientism & Utilitarianism

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### Abstract:

Foresters' preference for rationality and empirical science for selecting the means to achieve utilitarian goals is examined in light of history, tradition, and personality type. The effects of talking to the public in scientific and economic terms and the dismissal of other decision-making influences, such as local (indigenous) knowledge, intuition and public opinion are considered.

### Keywords:

Scientism, utilitarianism, empiricism

Other speakers have looked at the relationships of environmentalism and religion. Our concern is to discuss forestry in relation to scientism and utilitarianism. It is as difficult to say that scientism and utilitarianism are the religions of forestry as it is to say that environmentalism is a green religion. This is so because forestry, like environmentalism, is made up of a variety of schools of thought and modes of practice; it is not a monolithic, single entity. Still, if scientism and utilitarianism are not the religions of forestry, they may have religion-like qualities. To start, some working definitions are in order.

## Definitions

To reiterate, *scientism* is a worldview that accepts natural explanations for all phenomena, excludes supernatural or paranormal viewpoints, and believes in empirical science and reason as the ways to truth and knowledge. In this belief the only way to truly know how the world works is through science. The role of experience, tradition, religion, art, music, and literature as ways of seeking the truth are discounted and supplanted.

Utilitarianism is a philosophy flowing out of the works of English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. It postulates that the useful is good, and the determining consideration of right conduct should be the usefulness of a given action. Or, stated in a more familiar way, one we connect with Gifford Pinchot and one he attributes to his associate, William McGee, the aim of any action should be the largest possible balance of pleasure over pain or **the greatest happiness (good) of the greatest number over the long term**. A forestry practice that immediately comes to our minds in this context is that of “multiple-use.” What could produce more happiness than multiple-use?

But we want also to emphasize that in our operational definition of utilitarianism, we think of it in terms of “utilizationism,” especially of timber, the use among multiple-uses that forestry seems to traditionally take to be primary, indeed, even exclusionary. We’ll try to display reasons for this definition as we proceed.

## Evidence of Scientism and Utilizationism in Forestry

Anecdotally, it is not difficult to find examples of scientism in forestry. The December 1989 issue of the *Journal of Forestry* carried the gist of Prof. Robert Lee’s address to graduating forestry students at the University of Washington (1989, Vol. 87, No. 12; p. 3). Prof. Lee encouraged the graduates to go beyond science and to look to art, literature, poetry, religion, music and experience as ways of knowing how the world works. A letter to the editor in a later issue held that Prof. Lee was off-base in his talk, saying that “We must have teachers who understand how knowledge is acquired and will clearly explain that solutions to problems will continue to flow from the only reliable method we have for determining truth: the scientific method” ((1990; Vol. 88, No. 6; p. 6). Prof. Lee’s powerful response was the single word, “Scientism.”

Another forester, James Hensel (1994) wrote a piece entitled, “We Need The Trees,” repeating the phrase, mantra-like, nine times, including saying that “There is ‘no management’ on a wilderness area and, WE NEED THE TREES.” He seemed to miss the thought that

ecologically, economically, psychologically, spiritually, and in many other ways, we need the forest before we need the trees. This reminds us of the statement by then SAF President Bill Barton, who said, “I believe the profession must focus on the establishment, growth, and harvesting of commercial crops of timber. This does not mean that other products and benefits should be ignored. It simply means that timber comes first. It keeps us in line with the natural order of things” (Jan. 1992; p. 13). Pres. Barton, unfortunately, did not expand on just what the natural order of things is, other than putting timber number one.

Another forester, a consultant, wrote that forest management “Decisions must be made on the basis of all the facts available at the time...The general public should be heard...but listened to only when its proposal makes scientific sense.” (April 23, 1999). Foresters, of course, must have the courage to say, “No” to scientifically or otherwise unsupportable schemes, but proposals that make scientific sense can offer a wide range of options where considerations beyond science should come in to play. In part, that’s why forestry has long been called a science and an *art*.

Speaking more broadly, yet still anecdotally, we suggest most of the so-called “Right to Practice Forestry” legislation we have seen would best be called, “Right to Harvest Trees” laws. This confusion of timber harvesting as the *sine qua non* of forestry is one reason communicating with environmentalists is so difficult, and it indicates the utilizationism noted earlier.

Does any of this prove scientism is the religion of forestry? No, but it points us to the conclusion that many, if not most, foresters believe heavily in science and very strongly in the need to put timber first. Let us deal with just one area from the above examples before moving on, that of there being no management on a wilderness area. First, if one narrowly conceives “forest management” as being synonymous with “timber management”, then a case can be made that there is no forest management on a wilderness area. Also, if one conceives of forest management as “business management”, and sees no business in a wilderness, then perhaps a case can be made that there is no management on a wilderness area. But it is also evident that wilderness is the basis for much business. We suggest that these are traditional forestry views, and we are not alone in seeing these issues. In talking of divisions within forestry, one correspondent, forester Robyn Darbshire, said:

*The main division appears to me between the foresters that only see the forest for the trees and the foresters that see the forest for more than trees ([forestry-focus@topica.com](mailto:forestry-focus@topica.com); May 1, 2001).*

In contrast, we suggest that management is coordinating all the resources involved through the processes of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling people, time, and other resources for the purpose of attaining stated goals and objectives. Using this definition, wilderness is certainly “managed” even if trees are not cut. This example gets us back to the notion of ending the cold war with environmentalists. Religion aside, if we assume that there is a “war,” how can we expect to end it if we are in effect speaking two separate languages and not stopping to wait for any translations? In a different, non-forestry, context, author Os Guinness talks of arguments about “goods” and “evils” (2005; 193). He says:

*Such “goods” can no longer merely be asserted. They are no longer self-evident, except to those who believe them. They must be justified with arguments that are publicly accessible and persuasive to others if they are to compel assent in a pluralistic society.*

We respectfully suggest that the forestry argument that timber is number one has not been persuasive with the American public. Environmentalists believe that finding the proper relationship between humans and the environment is the most compelling task of the time. Foresters believe that they have found the right relationship, producing timber and other uses. Environmentalists have captured the mind of the public with compelling stories. Foresters talk of board feet, dollars per acre, and having “the” science. It’s not necessarily scientism, but it is a case of “our science” being the good science. Poet/philosopher/farmer Wendell Berry reminds us that

*But that is what is always wrong with the conservation movement. It has a clear conscience. The guilty are always other people, and what is wrong is always somewhere else. (Berry, 1990; 176-177).*

And when we add the language of war to the equation, the “other” become enemies to be overcome, not to be dealt with civilly and constructively, apparently so even if the other happens to be a fellow citizen. Author/lawyer Steven Carter says that,

*Civility requires that we listen to others with knowledge of the possibility that they are right and we are wrong’ (1998; 139).*

As long ago as 1910, Robert Underwood Johnson observed that

*...there is no more popular and effective trumpet-call for the conservation movement than the appeal to the love of beautiful natural scenery. In this matter the idealists (read environmentalists) are more practical than the materialists (read foresters), whose mistake is that they never capitalize on sentiment . (parenthetical comments added herein).*

Does this mean that foresters fundamentally believe that science is the only way to know the world? Absolutely not! We’ve asked many foresters in a wide variety of places and forums why they got into forestry as a life’s work. Overwhelmingly they answer because of their love for and awe of forests. Love is not a scientific law like gravity, relativity, or even evolution. We know that foresters of all ages and persuasions are thrilled by the rise of a trout to a dry fly, the call of a thrush, the survival of an endangered species, and by the stillness of a wildland at dusk--they are still rooted in the forest they love as well as protect and manage. But they don’t let the public or environmentalists know this because they have been socialized to act as if romantics are naïve and extreme, and that to talk with emotion and poetic imagery is to somehow disassociate oneself from knowledge and science. Such a course of action thwarts the fundamental spirit of foresters and forestry and leaves us open to the charge of what author Antoine de Saint-Exupery called “dying of intelligence without substance.”

Less than 20 years ago, a French psychiatrist did a commissioned study for the American Forest & Paper Association. He looked at how Americans perceive forests, with some interesting results, most of which we don't have time to discuss. But one of his strongest suggestions was to give up defending clearcutting---not to give up clearcutting, but to give up the idea that we could make the American public accept it. He said it was a losing battle, the bloody head butting the brick wall. Instead he suggested that we concentrate on the fact that as foresters we nurture, tend, cultivate, care for, and keep healthy forests for 60, 80, 100 or whatever number of years the rotation we work with, and then we regenerate a new forest. Clearcutting focuses on one moment in the life of a stand that we have honestly nurtured for all those years. Forestry is a cycle of birth, growth, death, and rebirth. And yes, the terms he suggested are more feminine than those traditionally connected with clearcutting, and therefore may be politically correct. They are also just plain correct.

## Forestry, Scientism & the Characteristics of Religion

The introductory unit of our session listed the characteristics of a religion to use as measures, in this case as to whether scientism and utilizationism are the religions of forestry. Here's how we see these characteristics as related to forestry:

1. rites, traditions, & myths – it is not a myth that humans need wood and wood products, but forestry tradition has it that the production of wood is numero uno, “the natural order of things.”
2. moral/ethical values – conservation, described as “wise use,” and “the greatest good for the greatest number over the long run” are professional values, maybe even dogma, that provide justification for forestry practices.
3. comfort and caring – Service is a professional value that is concerned with comfort and caring. The SAF says this is service to society, but this is not the only viewpoint. The Forest Stewards Guild says service to the forest is a foresters' first duty.
4. social systems – the SAF provides a social system via education accreditation, membership criteria, a code of ethics, and forums for interaction. Many foresters do not avail themselves of this system.
5. spiritual (divine) content – Gifford Pinchot is clearly not seen as divine, but his utilitarian philosophy and strong personality have dominated forestry in the United States since its inception. Again, this is not the only viewpoint, because Aldo Leopold and his land ethic also have a strong group of believers. A problem arises when the two figures are seen as having diametrically opposed views without looking for reconciliation and points in common. It becomes another case of “either/or” rather than a synthesis.

We conclude that scientism and utilizationism may not be the religions of forestry, but they provide many religious-like aspects to the practice of forestry, and strongly influence our response to other points of view, like those of environmentalism. Perhaps the best description of

forestry is one that goes back to the progressive era of Gifford Pinchot, that is to say forestry practices scientific materialism.

## What to do

In the ideal world of scientific materialism, scientists are objective and mostly emotionless at their work, without value objectives; a little bit like Sgt. Joe Friday, “Just the facts, Ma’am.” In this world, scientists—including forest scientists and forest managers—do the research, observe, and tell policy makers what to do. In turn, policy makers provide the resources to do it. Notice that in this world, scientists, and thus foresters, not only know how to do things, they know what ought to be done. Think of this kind of world in relation to other parts of life, such as law, medicine, social welfare, and so on, and decide if it seems appropriate.

The problem with acting as if scientists, including foresters, operate without values is, very bluntly, that it is incorrect. Whether explicit or implicit, thought about or thoughtless, values are always present. The formulation **policy = facts + values** makes this clear, and the policy process is a way to focus on values and to confront one’s beliefs, values, and biases. In a democracy, the policy process of determining which values get funded and implemented and which do not is politics. Think of recent controversial issues in forestry---spotted owls, marbled murelets, and red-cockaded woodpeckers, chip mills and whole-tree harvesting, agroforestry and ancient forests, and genetically modified organisms---and see how scientists, how you and I, project values into the discussion. Look at SAF policy and position statements and decide if they are truly value free, or if they should be. Conservation biologists Gary Meffe and Steven Viederman argue that:

*...Scientists cannot and should not remove themselves from these unstated value judgments. It is quite acceptable (in fact unavoidable) to hold values as scientists and try to influence the policy process, as long as the scientific process of objective hypothesis testing is not compromised...(1995; 16).*

The first step is thus to accept the fact that as scientists and managers we have values and biases and we likely have been socialized to favor science and utilization. Compounding our value system is the fact that we each play many other roles, such as citizen, parent, friend, relative, and it is nearly impossible to divorce one role from another, yet they likely bring conflicting demands. The second step is to accept environmentalists as fellow citizens, implementing their constitutional rights through the political process. Finally, we must get beyond the notion that good science is that which reaffirms what we already believe and accept truths wherever they arise, recognizing that when two opposite points of view are advocated with equal vigor, the truth does not necessarily lie mid-way between them, and finally that because there are a wide range of options within the realm of scientific (and economic, and ecological, and social) boundaries, both sides might be true.

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