Internationalizing forestry school curricula: The private consultancy perspective

My name is Michael Sterner. I am general manager of Interforest, LLC, a consultancy in Portland, OR. I will offer my perspectives on why forestry curricula need to be international in scope and what might be done to achieve that. The US private sector of forestry has been involved in international forestry since Gifford Pinchot went to Europe to study the subject. In consulting, research, non-profit aid organizations, and timber industry there is an increasing need for personnel with both forestry training and international skills.

ALL FORESTRY IS INTERNATIONAL
Because forests transcend political boundaries, all forestry is international. International aspects of forestry need to be integrated into as many courses as possible. Undergraduate programs make the mistake of separating international forestry from all other forestry. To support my claim that all forestry is international I offer these examples. Consider how these core subjects are affected by an international perspective:

Silviculture. Economically important timber species have been disseminated around the world: Douglas-fir in NZ; Monterey pine in Australia; Eucalyptus in CA; Neem in Africa; Teak in Central America.

Economics. Trade agreements and emerging economies affect stumpage prices in US forests.

Soil science. Carbon and nutrient cycles are global or regional. Pollutants of far-off origin can reduce your forest’s productivity.

Forest protection. Invasive species: what are the dominant tree species in the Northeastern US today? What was the dominant species 100 years ago? Today invasive species arrive daily.
Wildlife management. Wildlife face exotic disease introductions. How can a forester confront these complex issues if she or he never heard about such things during undergraduate training? It might be frightening to be confronted with such novel resource problems, but fear is a completely unproductive way of dealing with the outside world. Whether you spend a career abroad or never leave your home state, young foresters will need to be knowledgeable of international issues.

JOBS

In Interforest’s experience the job opportunities in international forestry are largely in two sectors: international development; and timber investment, although these can overlap. Development work has a great need for people with the firm skills taught so well by our undergraduate forestry schools. Who can doubt that watershed protection would have saved lives in Haiti last week? Development work includes reforestation, fuel wood production, watershed management, community forestry, and forest enterprise development.

Second, overseas timber investment is of great interest to investment banks, timber companies, and institutional investors seeking to diversify holdings. Third, without leaving the US, there are needs for international expertise including US Customs Service agricultural and forest products inspectors; and Federal and State level economic trade experts. For the private sector there are contracting opportunities with such agencies. Also, forest managers will increasingly find that their labor pool for forest thinning and harvesting is of diverse backgrounds. In northern New England many logging contractors still come from Quebec. In the Pacific Northwest more forest workers are Hispanic. Recreation specialists will find more Spanish-speakers visiting their parks.

SKILLS

There can be little doubt that good technical forestry training is in place. Without certain minimum preparation for international work, it is not certain that forestry graduates can
effectively use their technical skills in the workplace. Most international-level foresters will gain international experience after college, and entry level positions give ample training (eg, Peace Corps). Nonetheless, schools of forestry could better prepare students to be more effective when they leave school. More importantly perhaps, exposure to international issues will maintain interest among foresters in international work.

Effective overseas work, and increasingly work in the US, requires cross-cultural understanding. In the absence of cross-cultural understanding, it is possible to do more harm than good in development work. If your interest is business, such as overseas timber investment, or lumber trade, the inability to understand the culture you work in will result in failure and no profit. The most basic first step toward the goal of cross-cultural understanding is to study a foreign language. My primary recommendation is to require forestry undergraduates to study 3 semesters of a foreign language. SAF accreditation should allow for this modification.

Advisors should encourage study of languages spoken in the major forested regions of the world and by major forest products consumers. The most needed languages are: Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Russian, and French. Learn one language as an undergrad, and others will be easier.

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Another way to internationalize a forestry school is to diversify the faculty and student body. Cross cultural understanding can be gained in college by interaction with international faculty, American faculty with international experience, and students of diverse backgrounds. Study abroad is a very good idea, although Anglophone destinations may be the only possibility. Work experience immediately after college [in Peace Corps] is still the best at delivering this kind of experience and language training. Finally require or at least encourage macro-economics and international trade courses in the curriculum. For both US and overseas careers, foresters will be better prepared if these recommendations are followed. I believe that our profession and forests themselves are better served by foresters who have an international outlook.
Thank you.